Part of the Tribe

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Part of the Tribe

by Humanities_Handbag, Invader_Sam

Summary

The fight with Robotnik was long over, Sonic was adjusting to life in his larger family, and everything seemed to finally be settling down while the Wachowskis waited hopefully with bated breath on Tails' and Knuckles' impending adoptions.

Then again, no one said forming a tribe would be easy.

The New Normal

“Tails, honey, what have I said about leaving your tools at the kitchen table-”

“Sorry, Mom! There’s just nowhere to-”

“Mother! I demand help with this science work!”

“What did we *just* talk about?”

“I demand help with this science work *, please*.”

“Not quite, but we’re getting there…”

Sonic toed off his shoes at the front door, listening to the new sounds of Home crowd around him. Ozzie appeared at his side, nosing at his backpack. “Sorry, man, I ate all my lunch today.” The dog snorted, then trotted off in search of more scraps.

He hung his backpack on its designated blue hook, next to two other hooks, painted red and yellow, in the increasingly-stuffed-full entryway. Dad kept talking about building cubbies to corral it all, but so far it remained on the To Do List.

Tails appeared in the hall, arms full of tools as he hovered up the stairs. “Gotta ask Dad for a desk or something upstairs.”

“You can use mine!” Sonic called up after him.

“Thanks!”

Maddie appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. “And where are *you* gonna do your homework?” she asked with a grin.

“I always use the coffee table, anyway.”

“Speaking of, let’s get to it. Practice is at five.”

“I know.”

“Mother, I- er, *please*, I do not understand this question?”

Maddie rolled her eyes. “He’ll get it eventually, right?”

“Sure, Mom.” Sonic nodded, unzipping his bag and fishing for his social studies book. “Probably about the same time he stops arguing with the toaster.”

She sighed, and retreated back to her eldest.

The last few weeks had been a gentle movement through what Sonic had dubbed their *New Normal*. They moved faster than Sonic would have expected. Reasonably, though, that may have been because he wasn't spending an egregious amount of time finding reasons to hate his new housemates.

There was homework to finish, practices to attend, and swaths of time used for adjusting to their new routines. He wasn't the center of his parents attention anymore, but it wasn't something he entirely disliked. It was odd, thinking back to just a week ago when he'd felt so completely abandoned after Maddie's time was monopolized for an hour after work with Knuckles' questions from tutoring. When she suggested Sonic go and "find Tails for help" he understood why. His new brother was smart. And it was easy to hang out with them. Fun, even, when Tails got to rambling about inventions. Even more fun when he was allowed to try them out for himself (though they'd set more limits on that ever since he and Tails accidentally blew up the shed, shamefaced and getting splinters plucked out of their knees by very frustrated parents who had bought them safety equipment *for a reason*).

And while playing with Knuckles wasn't anything special (he wasn't much for *playing* per say) it was its own brand of wonderful to watch Maddie groan while the eldest yelled at the toaster for *Burning Mother's Breakfast, You Fiend!*

Speaking of which;

"Knuckles, Honey, please don't punch the ice maker."

"I am helping it to make crushed ice, Mother!"

"It does that for you, sweetheart. Just- let's just finish your homework, yeah?"

"Fine! But I am coming back for vengeance later!"

"… Absolutely not."

Sonic chuckled under his breath and began his work.

4:30 arrived faster than anyone expected. Sonic's work had been long finished and packed away, and he was waiting by the door in his gear, duffel at his side, while Maddie tried her best to explain *again* how to use the oven to a Too Confident Knuckles. "Listen," Maddie said again, looking very close to the verge of panic. "Dad is going to be back at 5:30, okay? And I'm taking Sonic to practice. So all I need you to do is to put these pizzas into the oven so that there's something for you to eat if he's not back on time."

"Of course, Mother. I understand."

"Do you, though? Because I want to make sure you get this; you put them in at 375 for twenty minutes-"

"But Mother!" Knuckles glared up at her. "*You* are not understanding *me*. Should I instead set the oven to 750, then they will be done in half the time! That is helpful. I am being *helpful*."

He grinned. “I am the King of Math! Your lessons have prepared me well for my journey in the Kitchen!”

“That’s- that’s great, Knuckles. But I think maybe Tails should handle this one.”

“Tails knows nothing about domesticity! I am the *King* of Domesticity!”

“I thought you were the King of Math,” Sonic shouted from the door.

Knuckles gave him a piercing look. “I can be *both!* And you would be my peasant!”

“Uh huh. Sure.”

Maddie pinched the bridge of her nose and looked up. “Sonic, hon, why don’t you go wait in the car. I’ll be there in a second, okay?”

Sonic would have rather watched his mother prevent a wildfire, but his phone was blowing up with texts from the rest of the team. He glanced down, grinning at the string of emojis from Jeremy and Abdul. “Kay. I’ll be outside.”

“Mother, would it not be more prudent for me to simply use Father’s fluid fire? I have seen him use it on the grill!”

“*No* , Knuckles!”

Sonic snorted, stepping out onto the front porch. It was a crisp Spring day. The sun was still in a perfect spot to press the whole town under a blanket of gold light. They hadn’t had a heat wave yet, and he was going to enjoy that before Summer came and had them running back indoors for any sort of shade. He ambled slowly down the path and threw his duffel next to the Loser Cruiser, pulling out his phone to finally respond back to his friends.

“Hey, Sonic!”

He looked up.

Their Mailman waved at him from down the drive where he’d just parked his truck.

“Hi, Mr. Thorndike!”

“Told you, Sonic,” Mr. Thorndike stepped out of his truck, shuffling through the box just behind his seat. “You can call me Chris!”

“I know, Mr. Thorndike.”

The man laughed, picking up a few small packages, two larger envelopes, and some fish and home magazines that never stopped coming no matter how many times Tom had unsubscribed. “Well, can’t say your parents didn’t raise polite kids! Wish mine were half as mature as you!”

“Tell that to my Dad.”

Chris laughed again. “I sure will. How are they, anyway?”

“Good. Dad’s still at work and Mom’s trying to prevent our oven from burning down the whole city.”

“Tails up to inventin’ again?”

“No. Knuckles is up to cooking.”

“Well, I had a nice life while it lasted.”

Sonic snorted, pushing off the car as Chris began to walk up the drive. “I can take those, Mr. Thorndike! Mom’s busy anyway.”

“You tell her that Green Hill’s thanks her for her service and I hope the cooking works out.”

“I will!”

He waved goodbye to Chris as he got back into his truck and rumbled to the next house. He looked down, flipping quickly through the stack.

Junk. Junk. A package that he definitely thought might be Tom’s new meat thermometer he’d been raving about, another package full of supplies for Maddie’s office, flea and tick medication for Ozzie (and for all three of them), and then two envelopes that looked absolutely boring-

He stopped flipping through the mail and went back, nearly dropping the entire pile in his arms.

The stamp at the top of the envelopes - it was familiar. He squinted at it. A small wreath with Lady Justice sitting in the middle; FROM THE OFFICES OF THE HONORABLE JUDGE PENELOPE RAMIREZ

“MO-*OOOO*-OM!”

Maddie shot out of the house when she heard the screaming outside.

She very nearly saw red, more than the giant hulk of red in front of her still trying to argue his point about the possibility of tossing the pizzas into the sun (“I have the arm strength and I am skilled at aiming! Would it simply not be faster to use my talents?”), and for a moment she was terrified that she’d open her door to see Robotnik or Stone or god forbid G.U.N there to take her baby from her.

And so it was a huge relief to throw open their front door and see said baby standing there, bouncing on his toes.

“*Sonic!* God, you- don’t do that!”

“Mom! *Look!* ”

“You scared me into my *grave*, sweetheart!”

“You’re not *looking!”*

She looked at last. “*Oh!* ” In a rush, she was next to him. “Listen, I need you to go put this in my bedside drawer.”

“What? But Mom-”

“I promise we’ll show them soon.” She crouched down beside them, voice hushed. “But you and I are late and Dad’s not here. We can do it tomorrow morning, okay?”

He nodded. “Right, yeah. Sorry, I got excited.”

“I *love* that you did,” she told him, brushing his cheek. “But we don’t want to spring this news on them and then run off to baseball, right?”

“No.”

“So can you put that away at Sonic Speed?”

“On it!” In the blink of an eye he was gone and back, grinning at her. “All set!”

“Good boy.” She stood just as Knuckles and Tails appeared on the porch. “We’ve gotta run. But Dad will be home soon. Be. Good. And *follow* the instructions on the pizza box, you hear me?”

Knuckles pouted, but nodded. “Yes, Mother.”

“Have fun!” Tails chirped. “See you when you get back!”

Sonic gave the pair a two-fingered salute and then climbed into the car, still buzzing with the secret of those thick manilla envelopes. Once they were out of the driveway, he asked, “Can we tell them tonight? When we get back?”

“Lemme text Dad at practice,” Maddie said. “See what he thinks.”

He bounced in his booster seat, drumming fingertips on his knees. “Tails met Judge Ramirez before.”

“He did??”

“We ran into her at the hardware store. Back when Knuckles almost burned the house down the first time.”

“Ohhhh, Dad *did* mention something that night. I totally forgot.”

He kicked his feet out some more, staring down at them like they were the most interesting things in the car. “Did you freak out?”

She laughed. “I think I’m holding it together pretty well, personally. But I’m still a little worried we’ll come back to no house with Knuckles using the oven. Which reminds me. I might want to have Mrs. Mauve check in on them. I mean… her eyesight isn’t great but-”

“*No*, mom.”

“No, what?”

“No, I mean.” He pursed his lips, trying to find the words. “I mean,” he said, “did *you* freak out when you saw an envelope come in the mail.”

“Oh.” She slowed the car at a stop sign. “You mean when we got *your* envelope.”

Quietly, he nodded.

She turned around and pinched his sneakered foot. “I don’t think I’ve freaked out that much about something ever in my life.”

His beaming smile was contagious, and they both carried it with them all the way to the field.

Maddie sat on the bleachers while the boys practiced drills on the grass. It wasn’t a game, which meant that Sonic was allowed to use his powers a little, but when the Coach gave directions, he always listened and slowed down. She could see the way his legs twitched though, even from the stands. She’d probably have to send him on a run after they got back to burn off the energy, or he’d be vibrating through their bedtime routine.

She texted Tom when the team began to practice pitches from across the field to one another.

He called her just when they paused for a water break.

“They came!”

“They did,” she said, standing up on the bleachers to stretch her legs.

“Aw, Mads, that’s great!”

“It is great.”

He paused. “You sound… unsure.”

“Yeah, well…” She watched Sonic talking to a few of his friends. Abdul was trying to balance a bat on his chin while the coach’s back was turned. “Remember what Judge Ramirez said last time? It’s not a sure shot. The paperwork just means it’s filed. But after the last stunt with G.U.N.-”

“You know they’re not coming for us, Mads. We’d have them in a lawsuit before they could blink.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Except… I mean- I’m a little worried about Knuckles.”

“He’s adjusting fine.”

“That’s not- it’s not *that*.” She lowered her voice. “He’s been doing great. But remember that email we got a few weeks ago, from Ramirez?”

“Shit…”

“Yeah…”

They’d submitted for the application weeks ago without telling any of their children, not sure what the time-frame would be. The last thing they needed were anxious kids sitting by the door for any sign of mail. The reply to the email had been less than ideal.

Someone from Ramirez’s office let them know that they were more than happy to process everything, and would be on their side the whole way. However, there was just one issue that might have presented itself as an extra roadblock in a long string over already very large roadblocks.

Their eldest child’s first association.

The Wachowskis worked fast, but G.U.N worked faster, and they were still apparently trying to find every small bureaucratic way to make their lives miserable and still stay out of range from yet another threatened lawsuit. And their eldest was apparently the perfect bait for that.

“The whole *helping Robotnik* incident wasn’t just pushed under the rug for G.U.N.. She said there’d be some difficulties, same as Sonic, for Tails But Knuckles…?”

She could hear Tom’s brow furrowing from over the phone.

“Yeah,” he murmured. “Shit.” He let out a long breath. “Should we- are we going to bring that up with them?” She hadn’t even wanted to mention it when the email first came through. Her and Tom agreed to keep silent. Who knew what would even happen, if they’d even get to the first stages.

“I honestly don’t know. We weren’t even sure we’d get Sonic’s application passed. This is going to be a whole new sort of waiting game. But…”

“But?”

“But we’re definitely going to do it.”

“Hell yeah we are.”

She exhaled hard, training her face into a smile when Sonic turned and waved to her. She waved back.

“We should talk to them about it,” Tom said. “I know it might suck, but they should know. Just in case one of them - just in case Knuckles - isn’t approved.”

“Definitely.” She nodded. “Sort of wish we had more time to figure this out. But you know how Sonic is with secrets.”

“Are you talking about our Son, the Master Secret Keeper?”

She snorted. “Either they’ll figure it out in a day with him skulking around, or he’ll break down and tell them by tomorrow.”

“So tonight?”

“Definitely tonight.” She paused. “Actually, could you do me a favor? Would you mind maybe picking up a pizza before you’re back?”

“I thought Knuckles was cooking?”

“Tom.”

“*Oh*. Yeah. Totally. I’ll grab something.”

Hanging up and putting her phone back into her purse, Maddie sat back down on the bleachers and watched her son finish off practice, knowing that they had one Hell of a talk and some burnt pizzas waiting for them back at home.

Bad News, Hard Talks and Blanket Forts

Chapter Summary

In which complications regarding pending adoptions are explained.

The pizzas were indeed burnt.

“I… apologize, Mother,” he said, as soon as Maddie walked through the door and found Tom putting slices of pizza onto leftover paper plates from their last get together with his parents. There was a tray on the stove that held what looked like six or so bits of charcoal. Maddie swore one of them was glowing red. “I have failed you in my quest to make these Pit-za Donuts.”

“Pizza bagels, honey. And that’s okay.” She reached down to pinch his chin, and his tail gave a pitiful wag. “Looks like your father saved the day.”

“Aw, yes! Pizza!” Sonic ran through, chucking his bag into the hall, quickly tracking back to put the duffel where it belonged when Maddie gave him a look.

He was at Maddie’s elbow before she could blink. He motioned with his hand and she dropped down just enough for him to whisper, “Mom- are we gonna tell them…?”

“Soon, honey,” she whispered back. “Let me and your Dad start. Okay?”

“Kay.”

She put out her fist, and he lightly bumped it.

“What are you two talking about?” Tails asked from where he was pointing to the biggest slice for Tom to give him.

Sonic answered before Maddie could. “We’re talking about Nunya.”

“Nunya *what?”*

“Nunya business,” said Sonic, zipping over to poke Tails’ side until his younger brother laughed, squirming away.

“What?” Knuckles crossed his arms. “I do not understand. What is Nunya? Is it a tribe? *Explain*, brother.”

“Nunya business.”

“That is not an explanation!”

“*Nunya business*.”

“So help me, you will rue the day I harness this *Nunya* against you-”

“If you do that, then I’ll harness the power of *updog*.”

“What is *up dog* ? Mother? Mother, why is he laughing!? *Hedgehog, you will cease these mind games! Mother!”*

“Sonic, stop tormenting your brother.”

“I’m *not* tormenting him!”

“*Sonic.*”

“I’m *not*! I’m just trying to explain a mattababy to him.”

“What is a mattababy?”

“Ha!”

“Mother! Mother, he is playing his… his *psychic tricks* again!”

“He’s lying! Like a cowsay!”

“What- *what’s a cowsay!?”*

“Moooo!”

“*MOTHER!* END THIS *TRICKERY*!”

Maddie snorted and accepted a grease stained plate from Tom.

Her kids really were lucky to have one another.

They decided to sit together on the front porch.

It was still light out, despite the time; the sky brushed with pinks and oranges. There was a pile of gloves on the porch swing, and their fingers and mouths were shiny with grease, an empty box just behind them. They waved lazily to neighbors walking their dogs, Ozzy trotting up the drive to say hello to friends.

It wasn’t until the birds began to quiet, the sky beginning to mist itself in darker reds, that Maddie and Tom began their Talk.

“Hey, boys?”

Three pairs of eyes swiveled from where they'd been looking at Tails' modified hot wheels car (apparently he was trying to get it to go 80 mph), and one of them grinned. And then the grin dropped at the expressions on his parents' faces.

Sonic drummed his claws against the step. "Mom?"

Tom tweaked his ear. "Everything's okay, bud. We just need to have a talk, that's all."

Tails fiddled with the little car between his hands.

"So," Tom began, "we wanted to talk to all of you about some things that are going to be happening around here." He focused on Tails when he said, "do you remember when we ran into Judge Ramirez, about a month ago?"

The fox kit nodded. "Sure, she was real nice. Intense, but nice." He laughed lightly, then his eyes widened. "How come you're- she was talking about a-a- what was the word?" He looked at Sonic.

The hedgehog smiled. "Adoption."

"That's the one! It means being officially part of the family, right?"

Knuckles looked up from gnawing on his crust. "We *are* a part of the family."

"You *are*," Maddie said, reaching out to squeeze his shoulder. "But, if we can, we'd like to make it so the whole *world* knows it."

"If you can?" Tails echoed, ears dropping.

"Yeah, that's what we wanted to talk about." Tom slid down a step so he was at eye-level with the boy. "Because we've started the process, but it's not a guaranteed thing."

"But you did it once already! With Sonic."

"And when we were at *this* stage with Sonic, we kept it a secret." Tom stretched one leg out down the steps. "We didn't want to get his hopes up, in case things didn't go our way."

"So why-?"

"Because Sonic got the mail today," Maddie said, plucking wet wipes from a plastic pack and coming closer to start wiping down fingers and faces. "And he's not the best at keeping secrets."

"Hey! I could've been a secret agent in another life I'll have you know," Sonic insisted.

"Sure you could, baby."

"But then you just told us," Tails said.

"Oh. Forget I said that."

“Ha!” Knuckles crowed. “You are a feeble secret keeper! Right Mother?” He looked up at Maddie, who was watching him almost sadly. “Mother?”

“It’s probably better this way,” Tom said, quickly. “Because things are a little more… sticky than they were with Sonic.”

The hedgehog’s ears pricked up. “What? Why?”

“Because the government that gets to make the final call is the same government that G.U.N. is a branch of,” Tom answered. “And they're chomping at the bit for a P.R. win.”

Sonic frowned. “After all that bullsh-” Maddie gave him a look and he corrected, “ *baloney* they pulled back in Hawaii, you’d think this would be a golden opportunity for them! Make right with the kids they *tased*, right?”

“And you’re right, baby,” Maddie said, reaching out to brush his face where, just a few weeks ago, she could still feel the scabs from where the tasers had reached below fur onto skin. “You’re right. They can’t touch us over the kids they attacked. But… but that’s where we’re having a problem.”

“What! They- they want to taze us again just so the whole thing’s easier?” Sonic’s eyes slotted. “I don’t care what they’ll do, Mom. If they come near us again-”

“No, sweetheart, that’s not it. It’s-”

“It is me.”

The four others on the steps turned towards Knuckles, who was looking off towards nothing in particular, expression empty. “That is the problem.”

“What? No!” Sonic whipped around. “Mom, Dad, tell him it’s not!”

Tom scrubbed at his face, Maddie reaching over to squeeze Tom’s knee.

Tails grabbed Sonic’s hand. Sonic pulled it away, standing up. “That’s not fair! Why-”

“Brother, stand down.” Knuckles tilted his chin up. “It is not your fight.”

“But-”

“Those agents were following you closely enough to catch you all in a trap. I am sure it was easy enough for them to learn more about my… associations.” He got to his feet. Maddie reached for his hand, but he drew away too quickly. “I have- *matters* to attend to,” he muttered, snatching up his gloves and disappearing into the house.

Sonic watched him go, fists clenched. “How could they- Why would they- They shouldn’t care about that! He was tricked!”

“Sonic,” Maddie reached for his shoulder, but paused when he began to spark, letting it hover in the air between them. “We don’t know how, but they knew about Robotnik, and Stone, and

I guess… in the middle of all that, they found out about Knuckles."

"But he helped *stop them!"*

"They don't care about that," Tom said, gently. "They care about trying to make our lives miserable because they can't touch you." His eyes drifted down to Tails. "They can't touch *either* of you."

"But there were *two packets!* " Sonic's voice was creeping higher, his eyes flickering blue. "Why would the judge send them if-"

"Because she's *trying*," Maddie said, moving her hands up and down slowly in front of her chest. With his attention on her, he started to breathe again. "She *wants* to help us. She does. We're all just not sure if she can. And we won't know until we get further into this process."

"So- so what are we supposed to do until then?"

"We wait." Tom said. "It sucks, but there's not much more we can do but keep filling out the forms and making the calls we need to. And keep our fingers crossed."

Sonic looked between his parents, mouth opening and closing. "That's not *fair*!"

"Sonic-"

"He's *my brother* and *they can't do this* and you're just- you're just *letting* them and it's not *fair* -!"

"Sonic, buddy-"

But there was no reasoning with the fifteen year old when his eyes flooded over and he was gone in a flash of blue. They could hear the attic steps slam from the porch and the sound of something crashing against the floor.

They split up, Tom taking Tails with him up to the attic while Maddie cleaned up from dinner before venturing down to the converted basement. It was a space they didn't intrude on very often. As the oldest, she and Tom ran under the assumption that he'd prefer more privacy than the other two. As she descended the concrete stairs, she was unnerved by the quiet. Typically when something upset him, she would hear the heavy, rhythmic clanking of the barbells as he worked through it.

But tonight there was only soft shuffling, which, she discovered as she reached the bottom of the stairs and felt her heart drop into her stomach, was the sound of her eldest son packing up his belongings.

"Knuckles!"

His shoulders jumped up at her voice, but he didn't turn from his task.

"What do you think you're doing?"

“What I must.”

She blinked, shook her head, and was beside him in seconds. “No, nuh-uh, no way.” She made to grab the half-filled duffle. “You stop that right now-”

“Mo-Madeline, *please!* ” He pulled it from her reach, gaze darting up to her just long enough for her to see the violet eyes shining before he turned away again. “Do not make this harder than it already is.”

“*Madeline?*” she repeated, mouth dry.

He grunted, knelt to reach beneath his bed, pulled out the firebox where they kept the Master Emerald.

“No!” She dropped to her knees, both hands on top of the box, keeping it shut. “Don’t do this, baby-”

“I am *not* your baby!” The words shook as he shouted them. “You *must* let me go.”

“Why? Hmmm? Tell me, why in the hell should I let you walk out that door?”

“It will be better for-”

“For who? For your brothers? For you? For *me?* ” She took one hand from the safe to catch him by the chin. “Who in this house do you think will be *better off* if you’re not in it?” He kept his eyes averted and she shook him gently. “Do you *want* to leave?”

He looked at her at last. “N-no, I-”

“Then *why?*”

“Because,” he choked out, “because I cannot be *yours*.”

Maddie didn’t know what to say. She didn’t know if there was anything to say as the boy in front of her looked at the floor beneath them, at the fallen duffel bag, at the small collection of items he’d so fondly tucked away that reminded him of the home he was leaving behind.

There wasn’t much she could think to say, and so she pulled him in tight.

Holding him against her, she could feel his shoulders quivering. “Oh, baby.”

“I’m not a baby…”

She huffed a laugh against the top of his head. “I tell Sonic *all* the time- no matter how old you get, you will *always* be my baby.”

“But I would not be *yours*.”

“Of *course* you’re mine. You’re ours.”

“But-”

“But nothing. Hey, look at me.” She pushed away, keeping her hands against his shoulders so she could look at her boy's face. It was firmly set, but there wasn’t enough time for him to hide the tears clumping at his fur. “When we started this process with Sonic we weren’t sure if it would go through the system. But that never mattered. He was ours, even if it didn’t work out.”

His muzzle scrunched up, lines creasing across his nose and around his eyes. “Why do it at all if there is not a chance.”

“Because sometimes hard things are worth doing. We did it with Sonic to show him how much we loved him. To show him he was worth doing hard things for.” He went to look away at that and she pulled his face back. “It’s the same reason we want to try with *you*.”

“It… may not work.”

“It might not.” She tugged her sleeve over the heel of her hand, wiping at his face. “But even if it doesn’t, then you’d still be ours. You’d still have me and Tom and your brothers, even if it’s not on paper.”

She could see his throat bobbing, his mouth pulling tight to keep it from quivering. “But-”

“Knuckles?”

“But I *want* it to be on paper.”

She let out a long breath, pulling him close again. “I know, baby. I want that too. And we’re going to try, alright?”

He didn’t say anything back, and she pressed a kiss to the top of his head, hands moving up and down his back. “Your Father and I are going to try like Hell, understand me? And we’re going to keep trying. But you’re not going anywhere. I don’t care what you say, and I definitely don’t care what some stuffed-shirt agents say. You’re *mine* . Understand?” She heard a sniffle and squeezed him closer. “*Understand?”*

“Yes, Madeline.”

“Try that one more time, baby.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Good.”

While Maddie was downstairs averting a second runaway attempt in two months, Tails held Tom’s hand as they climbed the attic stairs. “He’s right, you know,” the fox said. “It’s *not* fair.”

“I know,” Tom said quietly. He bent down and picked up the boy, depositing him on the attic floor before scanning the room for his first son. “Sonic?” In answer, he got a crackle of blue

sparks from the top bunk followed by a muffled sob. “Aw, bud.” He hoisted himself up and into the room.

He was thankful that he hadn’t dropped his shoes off by the door when there was a crunch beneath his heel. He looked down. One of the frames from the desk must have fallen off in Sonic’s hurry to get away. He turned down towards Tails, who was just behind him. “Fly over,” he said, softly. “I’ll get the vacuum later.”

Tails floated over his head as Tom reached down and picked up the wrecked frame, carefully pulling the picture out from behind the shards. It was from a recent day together. Tails and Knuckles had hesitantly attended another one of Sonic’s games. The team had lost, but they’d still gone out together afterwards and snapped a picture outside the local ice cream parlor. Sonic had let Knuckles wear his hat and Knuckles had apparently thought that was enough of an invitation to hoist Tails onto his shoulders, and the three of them had stopped outside the door mid-argument (about *what* , Tom couldn’t remember) and it was just so absolutely perfect that Tom and Maddie had taken out their phones without the trio noticing.

Sonic loved the picture enough to request a copy and it had been on his desk in a baseball frame until it was in Tom’s hands again, the glass on the floor.

He set the picture on the tables beside the bottom bunk, peering as best he could over the rail of the top at a lump under blankets.

“Bud. You’re going to burn the mattress.”

“*Don’t care*,” said the muffled response. “*Go away.*” There was another rough sob and the blanket was pulled tighter around the lump.

“Sonic-”

“I hate everything!” There was another violent sob. “I hate *you*.”

Tom stepped up onto the ladder. “That’s okay, bud,” he said, gently, squeezing the lump’s leg. “I’m upset, too.”

“But you’re not *helping him!”*

“We’re gonna do our best.”

“What if that’s not enough!” Two blue eyes peeked out from beneath the covers then, glowing with little bolts of electricity.

“We don’t know anything yet.”

The eyes disappeared again, blanket pulled back over his head. “I *hate this* ,” he said again. “I hate this, I hate this, I hate you!”

Tom sighed. He wasn’t sure if the top bunk could hold his weight, but he wasn’t too worried, and when nothing creaked too badly as he hiked a knee onto the mattress, he shifted the rest of his weight up, moving around the lump to sit against the pillows on the headboard. The

blanket was keeping most of the sparks from escaping, and so Tom reached down, wrapping his hands around the twist of quills and blankets. He waited for Sonic to protest, to ask to be let go, but the boy didn't, and so he pulled the lump up until Sonic was settled against his chest, the two of them sitting quietly.

Below, he could hear Tails nervously fidgeting on the bottom bunk, listening.

"Quite the view you've got up here," said Tom, looking around the attic room. "I can see why you wanted the top bunk."

The lump shuddered.

"You could make some pretty epic blanket forts from up here, too. Maybe you can try that out with Tails and Knuckles some time."

The lump let out an awful, strangled sob. Tom leaned down until his chin settled against the top of the lump's head.

"I'm sorry…"

Tom rubbed his hand up and down his son's back, through the blanket. "You don't have to be."

"I don't hate you."

"I know that, bud."

He felt Sonic shift just enough for the blanket to begin slipping, until he could just see a black nose and blue, crackling eyes slowly going green again as he looked up at Tom. "Dad?"

"Yeah, bud."

"I think…" The words twisted, going rough around the edges. "I think it's *my* fault."

Tom blinked, looking sharply down. "What? No! Bud, you didn't do *anything* -"

"I didn't *want* him here!"

"Sonic…"

"I-I-I-" The boy pulled at his ears, his face a picture of pure misery. "I wished he would go *so* many times! Maybe the universe heard me and-and-and-"

"Easy, easy." Tom brought a hand up, catching both of Sonic's and lowering them so he didn't scratch himself with claws that had come out unintentionally. "The universe doesn't work like that."

"But I-"

“I’m telling you, if it did, the world would be full of a lot more dump trucks full of money. And way less male-pattern baldness.” He surprised a laugh out of his son and counted it as a win. “You didn’t make this happen, I promise.”

“Besides,” came a tiny voice as Tails poked his head up over the foot of the bed. “If it did, then the government would be trying to make things harder for *me* too.”

“Tails…” Sonic’s voice shook again, but he sat up and held an arm out, inviting the kit in. Tails was happy to oblige, floating up and onto the mattress, wiggling his way beneath the blanket until his head popped up, leaning against Tom’s chest, Sonic immediately tugging him close, hiding his face against the tufts of fur between Tails’ ears. “Sorry I wished that,” Sonic said.

“S’okay. It was a long time ago.”

“It was a few *weeks* ago.”

“That’s ages.”

Sonic chuffed a soft laugh. Tom scratched softly at the back of Sonic’s head.

“Dad?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s- what’s gonna happen to Knuckles.”

There was a second question hiding beneath the first that Tom somehow was able to hear. “You mean, is anyone going to take him away?”

His boys nodded.

“No,” he promised. “No, they can’t do that. They can just try and make this entire process hell for us, that’s all. They’re trying to scare us off from submitting the applications and going through all their red tape.” He flicked Sonic between the eyes. “Sucks for them, though, because they should know better than to challenge the *Wachowskis*.”

Sonic laughed, a little watery, and Tom reached down to scrub at his face with the corner of the blanket. “Yeah,” rasped his son. “We’re tough.”

“So tough,” Tails agreed.

“And very, very annoyingly persistent,” added Tom.

Sonic lifted his head a little more. “That’s basically our brand.” He wiped at his nose with the back of his hand, fur clumped around his eyes and muzzle.

“S’right.” Tom dipped down, pressing a firm kiss against Sonic’s brow, doing the same for Tails when he shoved his head against Tom’s face.

“Dad?”

“Yeah, Sonic?”

“I broke the picture frame.”

“I saw.”

“It was an accident.”

“I know, bud.” He squeezed the two kids closer. “We’ll get a new one later. But in the meantime, I know you’ve got an older brother who’s downstairs trying very hard not to let us see how scared and sad he is.” He sat up, and the two kids did the same, the blanket finally falling back to the mattress (only slightly singed around the edges - they’d need a new one of that, too). “Listen,” he said, grabbing their hands, giving them both a serious look. “I’ve got a job for the both of you, okay?”

He got two pairs of eyes fixed on him, and they nodded back solemnly.

“Your Mom and I are going to be submitting those applications by the end of the week. And we probably won’t get any sort of answer for at least a few months or so, if Ramirez keeps her word about expediting this whole mess. That means that it’ll be a *lot* of waiting and not hearing back for a while.” He squeezed their fingers. “I need you two to make sure that Knuckles knows he’s a part of this family, no matter what. You don’t have to talk about any of this stuff, especially if he doesn’t want to. But we’re going to move forward, business as usual.”

Tails bobbed his head. “We can do that.”

“Yeah,” Sonic agreed. “He’s our big brother. We’ll be the best, most supportive, annoying little brothers he’s ever had.”

“That’s the spirit.” He shifted, moving towards the ladder. Sonic zipped down before him and Tails jumped off the side, tails spinning until he landed on the ground. Tom swept some of the glass to the side with his shoe, and sent the boys to go wash their faces while he went down the attic steps to grab a vacuum.

Tom wasn’t always sure how he was doing at this whole parenting gig. It was a constant internal battle that he and Maddie often shared. But there was something about seeing how kind his boys were turning out that settled the little doubting voices, if for a moment.

There was a struggle ahead, but Tom knew that they’d somehow be okay.

Maddie managed to coax Knuckles back up the stairs, but their talk had taken longer than Tom’s had, so Sonic and Tails had used the extra time (along with a good dash of nervous energy) to completely transform the living room before they emerged from the basement.

“Oh my-” Maddie cut herself off with a laugh. “What’s going on up here?”

A step behind her, and clutching her hand, Knuckles peered around her legs to get a better look.

The younger two boys had used every throw blanket and pillow in Maddie's frankly-out-of-hand collection and constructed a fort on the living room floor. The coffee table had been pushed aside, and the ceiling fan had been used as an anchor for the rigging. They'd even pulled a string of Christmas lights out of the garage and strung them up amongst the blankets. Inside, every place not occupied by pillows was packed with snacks: boxes of Pop-Tarts, sleeves of Oreos, cans of Pringles and pouches of Capri-Sun. The TV was on, and a stack of DVDs stood at the ready.

Sonic zipped to stand before his mother. "I know it's a lot and I know it's a school night but Tails an' I thought maybe we could make an exception to, ya know, take a, uh, mental health night, right? We'll clean it up in the morning, I promise! And still go to school, unless maybe *you* think we all need a mental health *day* too…"

Maddie smiled. "I think you can all manage just one more day of school 'til the weekend." She tapped his nose with a finger, then looked out over the room again. "But this? I think this is a *great* idea. How 'bout you, baby?" She tugged lightly on the hand Knuckles still held in a death grip. "What do you think?"

The echidna gave Sonic a curious look. "You did this… for me?"

Tails was at Sonic's side then, grinning. "It's a Brother Fort!"

"No parents allowed," Tom explained off to the side. "Kind of jealous about that one. Sure you can't bend the rules?"

"Sorry." Sonic patted his Dad's knee. "Only people under 100 are allowed in."

"Ouch."

Maddie gave Knuckles' hand another squeeze. "You wanna join in? Looks pretty cool in there."

"*And* we got movies. *Not* Speed, because Dad said no. Which is *lame*."

"So lame!" Agreed Tails, who had absolutely no idea what Sonic was talking about.

"But we've got *tons* of snacks. And your favorite blanket. And if you want Ozzie to come in, he'd technically be allowed because he's like a smellier, weirder brother. And I don't want to hurt his feelings."

Ozzie, who was busy licking the floor, did not look as if his feelings were deeply hurt at all, but he did wag his tail when he heard his name.

Knuckles slowly let go of Maddie's hand, though he stayed leaning against her leg. "I suppose," he said, slowly, "that a night in a… Brother's Fort may do me some good." He gave both of them a stern look. "But you are not allowed to scorn me should I cry."

“We are *all* about the manly tears in this house,” Tom said. “Speaking of which. Sonic. You know what movie might be great?” He reached down to the stack and handed his son their copy of *Lilo and Stitch*. “Just a suggestion.”

Knuckles was a little forlorn that Maddie couldn’t join them in the fort (though he felt like the rules made sense for Tom, who rolled his eyes fondly and went to go grab he and Maddie beers from the fridge), but he ducked inside anyway and settled himself as stiffly as he could against a pile of pillows. Sonic had grabbed one of the quilts from their parents’ closet for the floor of the fort, and it smelled like leather and aftershave and lilac and the antiseptic Maddie used at her office and it was so hard not to melt against it.

Even harder when Tails and Sonic bundled closer, pressing themselves on either side of him. Sonic grabbed the box of pop-tarts and Tails grabbed the controllers to the TV. “I’ve never seen this one!”

“It’s great-” said Sonic, around a mouthful of crumbs and sugar and artificial strawberry. “Just don’t try and invent anything from it or Mom’ll kill you.”

“Not if she doesn’t find out,” Tails muttered, and Sonic let himself be proud for just a moment that his goodie-two-shoes brother was beginning to mirror his more mischievous qualities.

With the couch being used as a fort anchor, Maddie and Tom stationed themselves at the kitchen island, content to sip their beers and scroll on their phones and listen to their boys watch the movie.

Around the time Stitch was reminding Nani what ohana meant, they heard the distinct sound of their eldest stifling a sob. Maddie moved to get up, but Tom put a hand on her arm, mouthed, ‘Hang on.’

And sure enough, a second later she heard her youngest say, “It’s okay, Knuckles.”

“Yeah, man,” Sonic’s voice, thick and shaky. “We got you.”

She sank back into her seat, her husband catching her around the shoulders and offering her a tissue. She took it gratefully, dabbing at her eyes. “They’re such good kids,” she whispered.

Tom nodded and held up his beer. “Gotta say. We did pretty good.”

She grabbed hers and clinked the bottles together. “We really, really did.”

The movie wrapped up just after 9, long after Tails’ bedtime. His head was already dropping down when Maddie and Tom ducked to check on the three of them. Sonic was scrolling through channels and Knuckles was still scrubbing at his face, mouth twisted up.

“Good movie?” Tom asked.

Knuckles shrugged and stared at his socks.

“He liked it,” said Sonic, eyes on the television. “Just too *manly* to admit it.”

“I am *not*,” Knuckles muttered. “But it was. Enjoyable. I suppose.”

Maddie kneeled down by the entrance of the fort. “Alright. So you three. Are we going to our own beds tonight or staying here?”

There was a sleepy chorus of *here* from the three kids, Tails slipping down beneath one of the throw blankets they’d piled up on the quilt.

“And are parents allowed in to give goodnight hugs?”

“Only if those parents know the password,” said Sonic, raising his chin.

Knuckles shot his younger brother a look. “The password is guacamole.”

“Dude!”

“You may not receive a hug, but *I* would like one from Ma- Mother.”

“Well then, *‘guacamole’*,” Maddie grinned, crawling on hands and knees inside. “‘Cause this mama needs some sugar from her boys.” She had to keep herself propped up with one hand, but she slipped the other behind Knuckles’ back and scooped him in close. “Starting with my *best* boy,” she said, nuzzling into his quills.

The echidna wrapped both arms around her neck and held firm. Into her neck, he mumbled, “I will not doubt you again.”

“And I’ll never give you a reason to.” She kissed his cheek and then released him. “Any other takers?”

Tails raised his arms but couldn’t muster the energy to sit up, so she swooped down on him, kissing his face as he giggled sleepily. “Night, Mom.”

“Sweet dreams.” She brushed a hand over the top of his head and then looked at Sonic. “Power bump?” she asked, offering him a fist.

The hedgehog rolled his eyes and scooted closer, hugging her around the middle. “You know I’m all talk, Mom.”

She kissed him between the ears. “Love you.”

“You too.”

Tom took that chance to duck through with a call of, “any room for the *geriatric hundred year old?”*

“Just don’t break your back,” Maddie said around a laugh. Tom gave her a shove.

He gave Tails and Sonic hugs each, and was happily surprised to see Knuckles raise his arms when it was his turn. “Night, bud,” he said, pulling Knuckles close. “You’re not goin’ anywhere, you know that?”

“I know, Father…”

“And you know we love you.”

“… it is returned, Father.”

“Good.”

He and Maddie backed out of the fort, flicking off the living room lights. Ozzie curled up inside the fort after doing a few circles on the quilt, and their parents called *goodnight* one last time before heading upstairs.

And then there was quiet. Just the sounds of the cicadas humming and Tails’ quiet snoring and the occasional hum from the ice machine in the kitchen.

And then it was just Sonic and Knuckles beginning to drift off.

“Did you try to leave?”

Knuckles turned onto his side, watching Sonic, who was fixing his eyes firmly on the steepled point of their fort’s ceiling.

“I did.”

“Do you… want to?”

Knuckles shook his head. “I do not.” He swallowed. “I was not sure if I would be welcome if I did not bear the name of your tribe.”

The hedgehog snorted, nose twitching. “That’s BS.”

“What?”

“You’re a Wachowski. No matter *what* the government says.”

Knuckles laid a hand on Sonic’s arm and the two lay in silence a long while. And then-

“What is bee ess?”

Sonic smirked. “S’how I get around the ‘no cursing’ rule. It’s short for bullshit - don’t tell Mom I said that.”

The echidna laughed, low and rumbling. “I will not.”

“See? You got this whole ‘big brother’ thing down.”

“It is a role I enjoy.”

Sonic brought a hand down atop the one Knuckles still had on his arm. “Good. ‘Cause we’re gonna keep you.” He heard his brother sniffle, and kept his eyes politely pointed at the ceiling until they both drifted off to sleep.

Sticking to Old Routines, Feeling Out New Ones

Chapter Summary

> In which the family tries to keep things normal, all while big changes loom on the horizon.

Life chugged on.

Mostly because Maddie and Tom seemed determined to make sure it did nothing *but* chug on, the pair of them more determined than ever to make sure that Knuckles was tugged full throttle into normalcy no matter what.

“Don’t forget that we start looking at schools next week,” Maddie said, first thing in the morning before work after Sonic had taken down the fort faster than any of them could blink and Tails had made quick work of packing his own lunch (and then getting it *unpacked* by Tom once he saw that their youngest had stuffed his entire lunchbox with nothing but fruit roll-ups and one of Tom’s hidden soda’s that he was now going to have to find a *different* hiding spot for).

“Why would we look at schools?” Knuckles asked. “Does one absorb knowledge simply from a *glance*.” His voice was still raw from the night before, and he picked miserably at his scrambled eggs, barely looking up at Maddie.

She tapped a finger on the island in front of his plate, getting his attention. “No, honey. You’d *attend*. We'll register you.”

He muttered something about how it would be difficult to register a *nameless child* , but Sonic was quick to jump in. “You’re dumping him into *high school?* Mom, they’ll eat him alive!”

“They won’t,” she said, pinching a now horrified-looking Knuckles’ nose. “No one’s *eating anyone alive*, Sonic.”

“They will!”

“Sonic.” She sighed. “And it’ll only be a half day. I already talked to the principal. Jason’ll take over the second half.”

“Can’t believe he’s still coming back after the whole *covered in vomit* thing,” Tails said forlornly when Tom put a turkey sandwich into his now sugar-free lunch box.

“Yeah, well, that’s because your dear old Dad here tipped him a king’s ransom. So long as Knuckles doesn’t leak any other bodily fluids all over him, I think we’ll be fine.”

Sonic stuffed a slice of toast into his mouth, crumbs going everywhere when he said, “I’ll need to write you a slang dictionary so your head doesn’t explode.”

“I am an advanced being.” Knuckles stabbed his eggs. “I know six of the most complex tongues from my galaxy. I think I can manage to understand these new languages.”

“You’re sus and that’s cap. These eggs are bussin’. Really slaps, top notch.”

“… I will accept a dictionary.”

“Uh huh.”

When Jason arrived, Maddie left, kissing Knuckles’ muzzle and pinching his nose. “Try to do one fun thing today before I’m back,” she whispered. “Okay?”

“I will attempt it, Madeline.”

“Try it again.”

He flushed. “Sorry. Mother.”

She kneeled down and hugged him tight. “Nothing’s changing,” she said, softly. “Okay? Nothing is changing at all.”

He didn’t respond, and when she left, her chest was that much heavier.

It was a good thing they’d done Movie Night a day ahead of schedule, because Sonic’s baseball game always ran until 7:45, which, including time to pick-up/make and eat dinner, sometimes had their boys not going to bed until almost 11. So instead, Maddie texted Tom and when she arrived at the field with a van full of kids, he was waiting in the parking lot with Happy Meals.

“Dad!” Sonic called out the window as he fought with the buckle of his seatbelt.

“Hey bud! Thought you could use some fuel before you go kick butt.”

“Always!” The hedgehog was at his father’s side, hands eagerly reaching for the colorful cardboard carton, while Maddie walked around to the opposite side to unbuckle Tails.

“What’s the toy?” the little fox wanted to know as he clambered down to join them.

Sonic fished his out while Tom gave Tails his box. “Oh sweet! Mini-super-soakers!”

“Oh boy,” Maddie said. “Now they’ll have *concealed* weapons.”

Knuckles was the last out of the van, still looking like a piece of old gum that had been spat onto the sidewalk. He eyed the carton Tom held out. “I… appreciate being included, Father, but the portion sizes of the Merriment Meal are less than sufficient to-”

“Ah, gotcha covered.” Tom reached into the paper bag sitting in the trunk of the SUV and pulled out another box. “Big Mac for ya, big guy.”

“Oh.” Knuckles accepted the second box. “That was- thank you.”

“Never gonna let you go hungry,” his father said, patting his shoulder.

“Didja get milkshakes?” Sonic asked.

“You know the ice cream machine never works at McDonalds,” Tom said. Sonic and Tails’ ears drooped. “Which is why I, the Best Dad Ever, drove across the street to Starbucks and got coffee-free frappuccinos.” As they cheered, he handed them out. “And a Strawberry Acai Lemonade Refresher for Mom.”

“Ooooh, Best Husband Ever too.” Maddie took her incredibly pink drink and kissed her husband on the mouth.

“Ew,” Sonic said.

“Eat your nuggets,” Tom told him, before going in for a second kiss.

Despite his professed love for the sport, Sonic looked as if he would have rather stayed on the bleachers with his family, especially when Tails asked if milk shakes would work out of super soakers and Maddie *very quickly* confiscated the toys before their suddenly shifty-eyed children could try it out.

Knuckles was the epitome of Good Manners (or whatever *he* constituted as Good Manners), but that was usually how it went whenever Maddie was close by.

Though he was quieter tonight, sitting between his parents, looking down at his burger like it had a story to tell.

“Not hungry, bud?” Tom nudged their eldest.

“I- yes,” he said, but kept staring at it anyway.

The other families began to slowly make their way to the bleachers, many of them with coolers full of dinner. Jeremy and Abdul arrived, and Sonic joined them, swapping nuggets for cookies or chips. Tails tagged along, effectively stuck to Sonic’s side, though his older brother didn’t look like he minded much, introducing him to his other teammates when they gravitated over.

“You can join them, if you want to,” said Maddie.

Her eldest just shrugged. “I… do not want to be a bother.”

“I don’t think you would be.”

He looked off towards the field. The coaches were putting out cones and buckets of baseballs; one of them set up the field, the other going towards some of the attached cages for

pitching and batting.

One of them grabbed a megaphone and gave a five minute warning. Sonic popped the last fry into his mouth and went to grab his duffel from where the little family was sitting, Maddie stopping him only to tuck the tag into his jersey before sending him off.

It was a nice evening, and so the entire crew elected to stay. A few younger siblings must have had the same idea, because some of them flocked to the fence to watch, mimicking the batting swing and practicing passing back and forth between them with baseballs the coaches dropped over the fence.

Tails eventually got bored of sitting and went to join in, a few of the kids marveling over his two tails before ushering him into a game of catch.

"We'll have to see about starting him with some sort of sport," Tom mused.

Maddie hummed, flicking Knuckles' shoulder. "What about you?"

Knuckles looked up at her. "What about me?"

"Do you want to play a sport? You don't have to. But it might be fun to try something new."

"I have competed in gladiatorial combat for sport, but I… have never *played* a sport."

"Neither had Sonic before he came to us. He just knew the game."

"There are more Earth games than base of ball?"

"Tons of 'em," Tom said.

"Hm."

"And…" Maddie said, leaning in to bump her arm against his. "If you decided to join a team, that would mean you'd get your own uniform, just like Sonic has."

Tom's eyes lit up as he realized what she was implying. "Oh yeah! We could get a nice one, with a big ol' 'WACHOWKSI' on the back."

The deep creases in the boy's forehead smoothed considerably. "Really."

"Absolutely!"

"We just have to find a sport you'd be interested in playing."

Knuckles took a substantial bite out of his burger, and then spoke around it. "'Ow would we do 'at?"

Tom grinned. "I think you and I could spend some time with a little something called ESPN."

When the echidna raised an eyebrow, Maddie explained, "It's a sports channel on TV. They show *all* different types of games. You could spend some time watching, see what catches

your eye."

Knuckles looked back out to the field where the boys were lining up. It was easy enough to find his young brother in the crowd, sporting the jersey he'd gotten a year before. The embroidered leather WACHOWSKI stuck out among the polyester and iron on player names, and it was enough to at least spark a little twinge of hope behind his ribs. "That… could be suitable."

"There we go!" Tom beamed. "Wait until you see hockey. We'll need to reign in that strength though or you'll be getting penalties for checking kids to Jupiter."

Knuckles wasn't sure what that meant, but it was a nice enough thought.

Maddie and Tom wanted to keep their eldest from dwelling on the reality of the situation. They really did. Except that the paperwork needed to be sent in, and unfortunately they lived in a house full of three children who didn't know the definition of *privacy* or *personal space* . It was rare that Maddie or Tom *didn't* have a kid on their hip or clinging to their legs. Whoever started rumors that young boys weren't emotional or snugglers had never met their children. Even Sonic, who did his best to try and act the part of Tough Hedgehog could usually be found lingering just steps away, waiting to be swept into a hug.

And so it wasn't a surprise that they'd be found on Saturday morning holed up in their room trying to finish the adoption paperwork in secret.

To their credit, they did sincerely *try* . They even locked their bedroom door, which was unheard of on Saturday mornings. Their hope had been that maybe the boys would go straight downstairs and play video games or attempt to make some sort of breakfast.

Really. It was as if they didn't even know their kids.

They'd been up since around 6:30, whispering over the spread of papers in front of them, hoping to at least get a little head start. It was just after 7 in the morning when they heard the sounds of stirring from upstairs. The familiar thump of feet on the floor.

"Go downstairs…" Maddie whispered, clutching her pen tight.

And just like clockwork, their doorknob wiggled.

It stopped.

And then it wiggled again.

"What are you doing?" they heard a voice from the other side.

"It's *locked!"*

"What do you mean it's *locked*?"

"I mean it's locked!"

“Mom and Dad don’t lock their door on Saturday morning!”

“Okay, well it’s locked right now. Mom! Dad! Blink twice if you’re in trouble!”

“You can’t *see* through a locked door, Sonic.”

“Oh, right. Um. Just… make a bird call!”

“Oh my god…” Tom groaned, hiding his face behind the folder. “Oh my god, we’re raising *vultures*.”

The doorknob wiggled again. “Mom, Dad! We’re here for morning snuggles!”

“Maybe they’ll give up,” whispered Maddie.

And then, another voice; “Are we congregating here for our Morning Affections?”

“The door’s *locked*.”

“What do you mean it is locked? Mother and Father do not *lock the door*.”

“Except it’s *locked*!”

“*Mother. Father. If you are injured, call out to us! I will break down the door!”*

“We’re fine, honey!” Maddie finally gave up trying to keep quiet.

“The door is locked!”

“We know that, Knuckles.”

“How are we meant to receive our morning affections if the door is *locked* , Mother!” A pause. “Unless… you have ceased morning affections.”

“Oh jeez,” Tom pinched his nose. “We’re *scarring our kids* at 7 am.”

“Why can’t they just get scarred the regular ways,” Maddie whined behind her hands.

“I knew it. I knew they’d eventually get tired of us. It was because of the roller skating through the house, wasn’t it?”

Tom sat up. “What roller skating through the house.”

“… I mean. I would never do something like that, Dad.”

“Sonic.”

“How *dare* you pin blame on me. It’s because I’m your middle child, isn’t it?”

Tom rubbed his brow. “Just… go downstairs, guys. We’ll be down in a second.”

There was silence behind the door, followed by the sounds of conspiratorial whispering.

And then;

“Mommy? Daddy?”

“Oh God,” Maddie let her head fall against her knees. “They’re pulling out the big guns.”

“You don’t want to snuggle us anymore, Mommy?”

Tom let out a long breath. “Are we letting them in?”

“Are you seriously asking me that?”

Tom heaved himself over the side of the bed, walking barefoot across the cold hardwood floor, wrenching open their bedroom door. Their three kids stood there, Tails in front of the little pack, blinking innocently.

“You two really need to stop weaponizing your little brother.”

Sonic grinned too sweetly for 7 am. “Did it work?”

“What do you think?” He stepped to the side and the three of them barged through cheering, clamoring on the bed as Maddie shuffled the paperwork to the side. By the time Tom got back to the bed, he had to squish himself besides Sonic, who clung almost right away, snuggling just beneath his father’s arm, face buried into his chest. Tails was happily curled up in the middle. Knuckles, predictably, ended up against Maddie’s side.

She sighed, but leaned down to kiss the top of his head.

“We were afraid you ceased morning affections, Mother,” he said into her shoulder.

“No, baby. Didn’t stop them. Just… a weird morning, that’s all.”

Sonic sat up, nearly clocking the underside of Tom’s chin with his head. “Why? Were you and Dad *kissing* or something?”

Maddie laughed. “No. We weren’t *kissing or something*.”

“We save that for the kitchen when all of you are watching.”

“Gross!”

She reached over and flicked Sonic’s nose. He humphed and went back to Tom’s side. “No. We were just trying to get a head start on this. That’s all.” She reached over to her bedside table, where she’d stacked the folders and paperwork covered in carefully checked off boxes and familiar names and addresses neatly written out onto the right lines.

“Oh…” Knuckles said, quietly. “That is why you did not want us to come in.”

“Yeah, baby. That’s why.”

Tails rolled over enough to balance his chin against Knuckles' shoulder. "Are those… our papers?"

Maddie dragged her hand carefully down Knuckles' spines. "Mmmhm. They are."

"And…" he reached over Knuckles, pointing with one ungloved paw at one of the lines. "Is that-"

"Yeah, sweetheart. That'd be your new name."

She could hear the way Tails' breath stuck in his chest, clicking just behind his ribs. He swallowed. "Miles Wachowski," he said, testing it so quietly, they almost didn't hear.

Maddie smiled. Her hands kept up their gentle ministrations down the back of Knuckles' head.

"Did you… fill out my paperwork?"

"Do you want to see?"

Tentatively, Knuckles nodded against her arm.

She pulled out one of the sheets from the pile and brought it to the front, pointing to one of the last boxes that she'd already filled in with the intended name: ***Knuckles Wachowski*** .

"It is… kind of you to attempt this," he said carefully, though his eyes didn't waver from the paper. "I appreciate the inclusion."

"Hey." She gave his shoulder a little shake until he looked away from the paper and up at her face. "It's not inclusion, honey. It's your name. That's all."

Tom had his phone open, and was letting Sonic scroll through Abrupt Chaos on Reddit, the hedgehog just barely stifling manic giggles at whatever he was reading. "We're going to drop them off Monday. Maddie and I were thinking we'd do it before your school visit."

"You don't have to come if you don't want to, baby," Maddie said, softly. "I'm taking the whole day off. You can stay home and I'll come get you afterwards."

"No." Knuckles shook his head, stuffing his hands under the covers to stop them from shivering. "No, I will be fine."

She leaned down and kissed the top of his head. "You tell me if you change your mind."

Silently, pressed tight against her side, he managed a curt nod.

Stabbing at the Men

Chapter Summary

> In which paperwork is filed, an echidna starts high school and a hedgehog embarks on a new quest.

He didn't change his mind.

Not after they finished a Mario Kart tournament that day, or when they went out for a run later in the afternoon, or even after Sunday hit and he broke his record for most pancakes flipped without landing halfway out of the pan (three).

And he still didn't change his mind as Maddie loaded him into her car after Sonic and Tails had already been shuffled off to their own schools (giving him extra long hugs before they'd left) and the two of them drove to the county courthouse.

He was honestly expecting it to be more like the trials of his tribe. With grand, ominous gestures and hooded robes all staring down at him.

Instead, the two of them waited in line for an unfair amount of time in a building full of people in suits who wouldn't stop staring at them. When it was their turn, they were met by a woman behind a large desk who was less than interested in their case, staring mostly at her computer the entire time.

"Wachowski. Here to drop off adoption papers."

"Family Court, second floor," she drawled without looking away from what turned out to be a game of solitaire.

They rode up an elevator, a few more Suited People shuffling out of their way, Knuckles leaning instinctively against Maddie's legs. She reached down to run a hand through his fur, sending a few men warning looks before they coughed and pretended to stare at their phones instead.

There was another long line in another stuffy room that they waited on for more than half an hour before approaching another desk with another very bored secretary who took the huge folder and stamped it, loading it onto a pile. "You'll hear back in three to five months," he droned. "Be prepared for home visits."

"We've done this before-" Maddie began.

"You don't need to tell me anything. I'm not the judge. Any questions or concerns, call our office," they said, cutting her off. "Just don't overload the phones. You'll hear from us when

it's processed. Next!"

And that was it.

"I… thought there would be more to it," Knuckles said when they were back in the car.

She sighed. "You'd think so, wouldn't you? But like I told you, hon, adopting a kid is all just paperwork. And not many people care very much." She looked into the rearview mirror. "But we care. Okay?"

He nodded, watching the municipal building dropping into a blip behind them.

"And hey," she added, getting his attention back. "It's not like they can tell us what to do even if they have all that paperwork. We're gonna stick it to the man."

"We are going to stab men?"

"No," she laughed. "It's like… we're going to do what we want anyway. Because it's right."

"Ah. So the Warriors Way."

"Exactly," she agreed, before merging onto the highway to Green Hills.

To Knuckles' surprise, the school visit was somewhat the same, though the people inside were friendlier than the courthouse had been. They were taken through large hallways filled with doors, and through those were teenagers scratching away at paper.

"What do you think," Maddie whispered to him as they followed the Vice Principal through to the science wing.

"It is… very big." He hoped that his nerves didn't show through too much. They must have from the way she reached down and squeezed his shoulder.

"You're only going for a half day, remember?"

"Yes."

"And it'll be in smaller class sizes."

"I know."

She smiled tightly. "Today's been a lot, hasn't it?"

He swallowed. "I can handle it, Mother."

"Didn't say you couldn't, sweetheart."

He paused. "I am not as academically inclined as my brothers."

"You know that's not true. You're smart, hon. You just don't learn like they do."

The Vice Principal must have heard them talking because he turned around to say, “we have a few options that he can take as extracurriculars if he wants to try working with his hands for part of the day.”

They took a detour to look at the metal shop and woodworking classes.

“We’ve also got a program that goes out to our school’s farm once a week and helps out with the horses and machinery.”

Maddie grinned down at him. “Doesn’t sound too bad, does it?”

It didn’t.

And there was even more of a thrill when, at the end of the tour, Maddie and Knuckles sat in the office and filled out paperwork, and when it got time to put down his name, she wrote *Knuckles Wachowski*.

“That is not my name yet, Mother,” he hissed.

“So what. You’re ours,” she whispered back, nudging him. “We’re stickin’ it to the man.”

While the day had been overwhelming, even Knuckles had to admit that there was something satisfying about showing off his new school ID over dinner to a cheering Sonic and Tails.

“We stabbed at The Men today, Father,” he said, proudly before giving Maddie a very deserved power bump.

Tom paused mid-sip of his beer, forced himself to swallow before asking roughly, “You did what now?”

Maddie snickered, dishing out spoonfuls of mixed veggies onto everyone’s plates. “We stuck it to The Man.”

“Like Jack Black,” Sonic said, admiringly.

“Who?” Tails asked.

“Ugh, there’s *so* many movies you guys’ve gotta get caught up on!” Sonic declared, pushing his veggies further away from his mac’n’cheese (cross contamination was the wooooooooorst). “We should make *every* night movie night.”

“Nice try,” Maddie said.

“So when does Knuckles start at his school?” Tails asked.

“Wednesday,” Maddie answered. “We figured a short week would make the adjustment easier.” She turned to her eldest. “And Jason will pick you up after lunch.”

Knuckles paused with a chicken drumstick halfway to his mouth. “I will be… *dining* at school?”

“Don’t eat school lunches,” Sonic added. “They’re poisoned.”

“They’re not *poisoned*,” Maddie chided. “And eating with the other kids is important. It’s easier to make friends there than it might be during classes.”

Knuckles squirmed in his seat, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else, and Maddie took some semblance of pity on him when she added, “Sonic met his best friend at lunch. It’ll be good for you. And it’s a short week, so we can count it as just… trying out a new thing for a few days. Okay?”

“I suppose.” He lifted his chin. “I shall have to Stab More Men to prove my fealty to this tribe!”

“Atta boy.”

“Just maybe don’t phrase things like that,” Tom suggested.

“Father, you sound *exactly* like the Men we are meant to be Stabbing.”

“Yeah!” cheered Tails. “Don’t be *That Guy,* Dad.”

Tom got up to get a second beer.

When Sonic and Tails got home from school on Wednesday, they weren’t surprised to find Knuckles on the back porch, cross-legged on Maddie’s yoga mat with his closed eyes turned towards the sky.

“Should we go talk to him?” Tails whispered as the pair stood behind the shut french doors.

“I think…” Sonic said slowly, watching the echidna’s shoulders rise and fall, noticing the occasional stutter in the movement. “...when he’s ready, he’ll come in. And we can talk to him then.”

“Okay.”

So they retreated, fixed themselves a snack, and caught each other up on the day.

Which somehow led them to sitting on the couch *not* doing homework, playing cards splayed out between them. Maddie and Tom gradually returned from work, but they were mostly ignored by the two boys, who were deep into the Lore of Pokemon Evolutions.

Tails was fascinated with everything Sonic said and did, and asked a million questions that his older brother was more than happy to answer in kind.

“I can’t believe you have all of these!” Tails’ eyes were saucers as he flipped through Sonic’s collection of Pokemon cards, neatly organized in binders with laminate slots. “How do you play? Which ones are the best? Oooh- is this guy powerful?”

Sonic snorted, looking to where Tails' gloved finger was pointing. "That's Magikarp. He can't do anything, but his evolution is *sick* ."

"He catches a cold?"

"No - I mean it's really awesome. See?" He flipped through a few more of the plastic sheets and showed him Gyrados.

"Sick!"

"Right? Anyway, the card game isn't a whole lot of fun, but the video game-"

"There's a *video game!?* "

"Not until homework is done," Maddie called from the kitchen.

Tails flopped back dramatically, and suddenly Sonic began to see what Cheryll once meant when she said it only took so long before Jeremy's younger sister began acting exactly like him.

It was almost thrilling.

"Come on," Sonic said, punching Tails' shoulder. "It won't be too bad."

"But *Pokemon.*"

"Tails," Maddie warned gently from the kitchen.

"Fi-iii-ine," Tails groaned, sounding oh-too-much like Sonic. "But let's do it fast. I wanna learn how to play."

About halfway through their worksheets, Knuckles finally emerged from the french doors, stretching pins and needles out of his legs. The younger two looked up, but he strode past them to the kitchen, and from the couch they could hear them speaking.

"Hey baby."

"Mm."

"Ms. Mullens gave me a call this afternoon; she said everything went pretty well?"

"Mm."

The distinct pop-creak of the refrigerator door opening sounded.

"Just something light, okay? Dinner's like fifteen minutes from being ready."

"Mm."

There was a long pause and then, "Did you want a hug?"

“...very much so yes.”

He reentered the living room a moment later, a bowl of grapes in one hand.

“Hey,” Sonic nodded.

“Did you, um, have a bad first day?” Tails asked tentatively.

Knuckles sat in the easy chair that was typically Tom’s and set the bowl in his lap. “I do not think so.”

“Huh?”

Sonic elbowed the youngest one gently. “It’s… a *lot*. Isn’t it?”

Knuckles plucked the first fruit from its stem. “I have been surrounded by humans plenty of times,” he said slowly. “I attend your sporting competitions, I have joined Mother in purchasing food… But this was-” He popped the grape into his mouth. “-different.”

“Yeah.” Sonic twirled his pencil between his fingers. “First time without Mom or Dad around, too.”

Another grape plucked and popped. “The labyrinth which held the Master Emerald was *nothing* compared to the maze that is this High-School. Why must every hall appear identical?”

“Wish I knew.” Sonic’s smile was brimming with sympathy. “You get the hang of it eventually. Little differences start to stand out. I’d start looking for those - a dented locker, whether there’s a bulletin board, or vending machine.”

Knuckles nodded. “Cairns, yes, I see.”

“It’s not perfect, ‘cause eventually the maintenance guy will hammer out the dent, but it’s something anyway.”

Knuckles looked towards his brother, finally reaching out to squeeze his shoulder. “You are well versed in these ventures,” he said. “I admire your persistence. Perhaps there is more you can teach me.”

“Yeah, man. Anytime. Did you at least meet some new people? I didn’t make any friends until I was there a whole week.”

“There is a boy in my mathematics class who reminds me very much of you, actually.”

Sonic grinned. “Devilishly handsome?”

“His looks are subpar compared to that of his compatriots, as are yours. No. He talks too much, and I believe his skull may be thicker than most of his species.” Knuckles grinned. “But he is also kind in his foolhardy ways. I believe that, with my physical and mental superiority, we may get along just fine.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

“You are most welcome, brother!”

That night, Knuckles went to bed around the same time as Tails, which left Sonic with Tom and Maddie to himself for a whole hour. He happily sat between them, with Ozzie’s head on his knees, watching reruns of Brooklyn 99.

“Hey,” Tom said at a commercial break.

“Hmm?”

“I was coming down the stairs before dinner and I couldn’t help but overhear you guys talking about school.”

“Did you hear him call me ugly and dumb?”

Tom snorted. “Yeah, we’ll hafta talk to him again about that.”

“You know he doesn’t mean anything by it,” Maddie said. At Sonic’s melancholy stare she choked on a laugh and added, “We’ll remind him again to keep those ‘observations’ of his to himself.”

Tom stretched his arms over the back of the couch. “Before that, I was really proud of you.”

Sonic blinked. “You were?”

“Today was really hard for him and you stepped up.”

“And it helped,” Maddie added. “He seemed more like himself after you guys talked, right?”

“Huh. Yeah, I guess so.”

“That’s just the sort of thing I was hoping to see after we talked the other night in the attic.” Tom slid his arm down the couch cushions to settle it around Sonic’s shoulders. “And you probably weren’t even thinking about it, right?”

“No, not really.” Sonic scratched Ozzie behind the ears. “I just, I dunno, said what I’d want somebody else to say if it was *me*.”

“That’s because *you*,” Maddie said, snuggling in closer, “are an awesome brother.”

He felt his muzzle flush as he smiled. “Nah.”

“Yah,” his mother said, nuzzling her nose into his fur.

“I just wanted to tell you we noticed, and how proud we were.” Tom glanced in the direction of the basement door. “If we can keep this up, maybe he’ll forget about waiting for the adoption papers for a while.”

“We can only hope,” Maddie said.

“I guess…” Sonic leaned against his Dad, tipping his head back, “it’s sort of the Wachowski Family Special?”

“What’s that, bud?”

“The whole… *your moment will come*.” He lowered his voice, doing an awful impression of Darth Vader.

Tom laughed and reached down to ruffle his fur. “Yeah. I guess it’s kind of like that.”

“I’d say it’s exactly like that,” Maddie added, grazing her knuckles against his face. “M’proud of you, Blueberry.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

When he was ushered to bed (after paying the customary toll) he was blanketed in an odd sense of preparedness. He wasn’t sure if the Universe planned out anything, but if it did, then it must have been absolutely bent over laughing at the way it had blindsided the young hedgehog. Just a few months ago, he’d assumed that his Great Quest had involved magical emeralds and defeating a supervillain.

But here he was, reaping the rewards of the actual challenge; getting himself a family and being a kid.

Now, he had a whole new task. And unlike before, he felt ready to shoulder it.

Being the Best Middle Brother wasn’t going to be easy, but someone had to do it.

Grounded Morons on Mom's Last Nerve

Chapter Summary

> Sonic begins Operation: Distract Knuckles and Make Him Realize He Was a Part of Clan/Tribe Wachowski and Sonic Was the Best Middle Brother in the World and the boys go to the zoo

Sonic woke up on Thursday morning with a renewed sense of self.

Day One of Mission: **Distract Knuckles and Make Him Realize He Was a Part of Clan/Tribe Wachowski and Sonic Was the Best Middle Brother in the World** began with sunshine and perfect weather, and he was ready to take it on.

He also realized that if he ever wanted t-shirts made, he was going to need a shorter mission title, stat.

Sometimes it was easy, like that first day after school. He didn't really have to think about it to chat in the car, argue with Dad about what the proper definition of Classic Rock was, or give tips about dealing with temperamental vending machines. Mom had also brought up the idea of Knuckles getting involved in sports and he had *so many opinions* about that. So the rides to school were great. Everybody left feeling good and he'd realize halfway through social studies that he'd done his job without realizing.

And that was awesome.

What was just as awesome was the undercover work he found himself doing. A few of his friends on the team had siblings that were in Knuckles' grade, and it wasn't hard to reach out to them and let them know that this older brother was having a hard time adjusting.

Maybe some of them can show him around? he offered to a newly-created group chat he'd dubbed **Sibling Squad.**

All of his friends were texting back by Friday morning saying that their older brothers or sisters were going to keep an eye out, and that afternoon Knuckles came home looking a little lighter around the shoulders, talking about a strange group of teenagers who had adopted him into their lunch table.

"A few of them reminded me of your clan of companions," Knuckles said over dinner.

"Huh," said Sonic back, trying very hard to avoid the salad on his plate even while his parents gave him *looks* . "No kidding!"

(He'd show his parents the group chat after Knuckles had gone down to his room to weight train, and they were so busy hugging him that they basically forgot that he'd fed half of the carrots on his plate to Ozzie under the table).

What Sonic also hadn't expected was that his mom had been right from the start about him and Knuckles. They were similar in too many veins to count. When he'd first started school, there'd been moments of shame and grief when they'd moved him into remedial math, and it was clear that the same embarrassment lingered on Knuckles' face when he got home from school one day the next week.

Sonic was quick to sweep in. "It's fine, dude," he said, punching Knuckles' shoulder. "I was there, too." And then he dragged his older brother with him to the coffee table to do their homework together.

And that's where they ended up every day after school from then on. The two of them quickly scanning through binders and textbooks and looking over to Tails for help when they didn't understand something.

Most days, Tails had to explain what a polynomial or the pythagorean theorem was three times, but then it always clicked eventually, and they'd spend the rest of the afternoon building decks of Pokemon cards. Tails got a little too invested in crafting the absolutely most-optimum team, and Knuckles kept advising that he simply pick the cards with the highest numbers. Then they'd argued about strategy for so long they didn't actually get to play before Maddie was calling them for dinner. But that was okay, because there was always tomorrow. Or the next day. Or the next.

And it. Was. Awesome.

There were solo trips with his parents still. Like when Tom took Sonic one weekend to see a new Lego exhibit at a local museum or when Maddie took him to the dog rescue to volunteer for the day while Knuckles and Tails both finished up their own work back home. But those were far and few, and Sonic quickly began looking forward to family activities.

It was more fun that way. All five of them (and occasionally Ozzie) going out and exploring other parts of Green Hills or the towns beyond. It was new for all of them. Sonic hadn't ever gotten much chance to actually take his time. These were the places he'd run through when he was upset or alone. And now he and his family strolled through the streets, stopping to get food or souvenirs or take corny pictures outside of museums.

And it helped when Knuckles got that look in his eye; the one where he stared into space for too long, and Sonic knew, he just knew, that he was thinking about that stack of papers shuffling away somewhere he couldn't reach.

(Sonic understood now why his parents had kept it a secret. He would have gone just as insane too).

"I don't know if this is working," he told his parents one night when he'd been too frustrated to sleep and appeared at their door with a look that had Tom patting the space between them,

Sonic zipping forward to squeeze his way between his parents. Lying on his side, blanketed by the duvet and the smells of leather and antiseptic and lavender lotion, it was a little easier to breathe beyond the tight bindings along his ribs.

“Honey,” Maddie said, gently skimming fingers through his quills. “You’re doing *so much* .”

“More than you have to,” added Tom, just as gently. “Give yourself a break. You’re not doing this alone, remember?”

“I know. But- but he just looks so *sad* .”

Maddie sighed. “Probably because he *is* . But lucky for him, he’s got a great little brother to pick him up whenever he’s ready.”

“But, again, this is a whole-family-effort,” Tom said. “And Mom and I were noticing the dip too. So we were texting earlier-”

“-and we were tossing around ideas,” Maddie finished her husband’s sentence, “for something fun we could all do this weekend.”

“Since you don’t have a game on Saturday,” Tom said. “We could drive a little further out than we usually do.”

Sonic’s ear pricked up. “Where?”

Maddie smiled in the dark. “The zoo in Billings just opened a new ‘Small Animals’ exhibit. With echidnas.”

“And hedgehogs,” Tom added.

“For real?”

“For real.”

The boy tried to smile around a yawn. “That sounds awesome.”

“We thought so too,” Tom said. “So Saturday morning we’ll make the drive.”

Satisfied, Sonic finally let his eyes close. “Cool.”

And it *was* cool.

ZooMontana was sprawling and full of regular families doing regular family things. Sure they got a couple of weird looks, but they also got a few excited kids who’d seen the videos online of the Robotnik fight and wanted autographs. Maddie and Tom talked them down to high-fives instead.

They got shaved ice *before* lunch, and marveled at how big bison were in real life. Tails got a little freaked out in the Bat House, but then Maddie found a mother carrying a baby on her

back and he decided they were cute after all. They splurged for the Giraffe Feeding, and saw a turtle who was older than all of them combined.

Everything was going great-

-until they got to the exhibit they'd driven over an hour to see.

"This *cannot* possibly be an Earth echidna." Knuckles shook his head, peering into the enclosure. "It is much too small."

"Weird, right?" Tails said, watching the prickly little creatures waddle around. "Of the three of us, I'm the only one who looks even remotely like the Earth counterpart."

"It says they lay eggs," Sonic pointed at one of the numerous information plaques surrounding the pen. "Did you come out of an egg?"

"What do you think *these* are for?" Knuckles raised a spiky fist. "If not for breaking out of a shell."

"They also only eat bugs, like ants and termites," the hedgehog kept reading. "Looks like Mom's gonna hafta add those to her shopping list."

Knuckles snorted. "Don't be ridiculous." He pushed away from the pen, meandering over to another exhibit.

Sonic kept reading. "They can only move about a mile and a half per hour! And their brains are *really* small."

"Sonic…" Maddie warned.

"It says here," Knuckles said, jamming a finger at a placard in front of the hedgehog pen, "that your species is extremely lactose intolerant. Such a shame you can't join us for iced cream any longer." The hedgehog behind the glass blinked at Knuckles before going back to chomping happily at its dried grubs.

"What? Nuh uh!"

"They also have remarkably poor eyesight," he continued. "And they navigate by smell. Is that how you've been managing to not run into walls all this time?"

"Mo-oooom!"

"You brought this on yourself," she said, peering into a weasel enclosure. "Don't come crying to me."

"Ha!" Knuckles jabbed the sign again. "It says here that you heal by inflating with gas! It is no wonder Father has dubbed you as the *air head* of the family!"

"I'm not the toothless dumbass who digs all day!"

“At least I do not *lick myself* in self defense!”

“At least *I* have nipples!”

And that, apparently, was the last straw.

With a battle cry, Knuckles launched himself at his younger brother, tackling him to the ground. The poor, unsuspecting families that had just wanted to spend a morning out of the house had to hurry out of the way of the blue and red ball of flying fists and sparks of chaos energy.

“Oh geez.” Tails huddled behind Maddie’s legs.

“Boys!” she shouted, but they didn’t hear her over their continued volley of insults.

It was a true mystery that Tails would never understand. In all his time traveling intergalactic nebulae, he’d never once found anyone able to catch his kind. The idea alone was inconceivable. For all he knew, anyone who tried to touch them mid-speed may as well have said goodbye to their hands. They’d have better luck touching a sprinting taser. At least *that* didn’t have teeth.

And yet, somehow, some way, by some mythical, furious force, Maddie Wachowski reached into the arguing, snarling, sparking blur and wrenched apart the two boys mid-speed, bare handed, without breaking either a sweat *or* a bone.

Tails could only stare, not sure whether to be impressed or terrified, as she hefted them both apart, holding the boys by their scruffs.

“Apparently,” she hissed, “the plaques left out what their *mothers* did to them when they acted out in *public!”*

“He instigated!” Knuckles said, trying to take a swing at Sonic again.

She shook him by the scruff.

“He’s the one that tackled *me!”*

“If you had not begun your teasing-!”

She dropped both boys down before kneeling a little too hard at their level. They both flinched when her knee *smacked* against the pavement. If it hurt, she didn’t show it, glaring daggers at her eldest kids. “I’m going to say this *once* ,” she said, in a voice that had even Knuckles paling. “If you try anything like that again, I don’t care if Robotnik himself comes down to Earth again. You won’t be leaving my house until you’re *both* toothless. And you can say goodbye to your video games for a *month* if I have anything to say about it.”

Knuckles blinked, meeting Sonic’s own horrified stare.

She glared at the both of them again. “Next time, I'm leaving you both at the zoo and taking those guys home,” she pointed at the cages, where the little echidna and hedgehog were

snuffling adorably through their enclosures. “Then you two can argue about who’s plaque says what when I write about *why you’re there.* Understand?”

“But-”

“ *Do we understand each other?”*

“Yes, Mother!” Knuckles’ voice, usually so deep, had risen into a squeak. Sonic matched him just as quickly.

“Yupyupyup! Totallycompletelyunderstand!”

That was apparently the moment that Tom decided to come back from the bathroom, watching his wife swiftly stand up and take both of her eldests by the hand with more force than necessary.

“Uh- did I miss something?”

“Not much. We only just nearly leveled the zoo arguing over who has nipples.”

Tom blinked. “Excuse me?”

At her sides, Sonic and Knuckles both stared at their shoes.

“So, uh… guess we’re going home then?”

At his feet, Tails sighed. “Guess so.”

“ *I* am taking these two home,” Maddie announced, shaking both the boys hands in her tight fists. “I think you and Tails should stay. Catch an Uber home whenever you’re ready.”

So that’s what they did.

She fumed silently along the highway, until about the forty-five minute mark when she heard from the backseat-

“Where are they?”

“What?”

“Your nipples. I do not see them.”

“They’re under my fur, dude.”

“Do they serve a purpose?”

“No. They’re just… there.”

“Oh.” There was a long pause and then, “I have eaten bugs before.”

Sonic snorted. “Me too.”

“There was a variety of larvae on our planet-”

“The pink ones, right?”

“Yes! They were very filling.”

“And a cinch to catch.”

“Not as good as hammed burgers, though.”

“Nothing’s better than hamburgers.”

“Not even pizza?”

“You had to bring *pizza* into this?”

Knuckles snorted. “It is a good thing you are able to eat dairy, then. Unlike your Earth brethren.”

“Don’t know what I’d *do* if I couldn’t!” Sonic paused. “And… you’re smarter than yours. So. That’s good.”

“I am loath to admit that you are as well, at times.”

At the wheel, Maddie sighed. Both boys fell silent again, looking towards the drivers seat like they’d been ushered to the gallows. “You know I love you both, right?”

In the rearview mirror she saw them elbow each other.

“We love you too, Mom.”

“We are sorry we dishonored you.”

“Yeah, mom,” said Sonic, doing his best to sound pitiful. “We *are* sorry.”

“I know you are.” She turned onto the exit ramp for Green Hills.

Knuckles kicked absently at the center console. “It seems I am not suited for the role of Eldest Brother after all…”

Before Maddie could respond, Sonic piped up, “What? No way, dude. I mean, I *did* start it. If anything *I’m* the one who-”

“Boys,” their mother cut him off. “You know siblings fight, right?”

“Yeah, on *TV* ,” Sonic said. “But-”

“Did I ever tell you about the time I knocked Rachel’s tooth out?”

Behind her she heard matching horrified gasps and had to keep from laughing.

“No!”

“That *cannot* be true, Mother!”

“Yup.” She merged carefully as the four-lane highway became two-lanes. “I caught her reading my diary. Thank god it was a baby tooth, but hoo-boy was my mom steamed. We didn’t see the sun for a *week.* And even after all that, it didn’t stop us from going at it every now and again.”

Sonic let out a muffled snicker. “Oh my god, Mom.”

“Yeah, I know. But look, I don’t expect the two of you to get along perfectly all the time. But you *gotta* keep it at home, you hear me? We can’t go places and do fun stuff if I’ve gotta worry about the two of you wrestling at the water park or wherever.” She rolled to a stop at a redlight, and twisted around to look at them. “You think you can do that for me?”

Both boys nodded quickly.

“Good.” She turned back to the road. “Then maybe we can work something out.”

“Meaning…?” Sonic asked.

“Meaning that maybe you can work off your sentence. Starting with you each writing me an essay about each other’s animal - with *out* any insults.”

“How *long* of an essay?” Knuckles asked.

She smiled as they rolled down Main Street. “Let’s say… two pages?”

“Double-spaced?” Sonic raised a finger.

“Sure.”

“Yesss.”

“I am not… adept at the computer,” Knuckles muttered.

“Can I type his?”

Maddie pressed her lips tight to keep from smiling too widely. “Sure, baby.”

By the time dinner was ready and Tom and Tails returned home, she had two completed essays on the kitchen island, and two teenage boys playing cards in the living room. Tom came up behind her, kissing her cheek and asking. “So how grounded are they?”

“Less grounded than when we left the zoo,” she told him. “Two days sans TV or video games. And they agreed to some extra chores. Looks like you’ll have partners mowing the lawn and mulching next weekend. ”

Tom’s brow crinkled, almost hopefully. “ *Without* superspeed?”

“Without superspeed.”

His grin was luminescent. “Glad to hear it.” He leaned over her shoulder. “Did you have them write *papers* ?”

“Yup.”

“Genius.”

“I try.”

He peered into the living room, where the two boys were amiably showing Tails how to play war. “Well, I guess we answered our own question about what adopting two teenagers would be like.”

“Don’t even start.” She rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Thank goodness we love’em.”

He laughed. “Tails told me you threatened to put them in the zoo?”

“I was thinking about it for a second.”

“What would you have called the exhibit?”

“Devilishly handsome boys!” Sonic hollered.

“I was thinking more *Grounded Morons on Mom’s Last Nerve* .”

“… I prefer Sonic’s,” another voice grumbled from the living room.

It was like that now. They would squabble, and then they would come back together. An argument usually didn’t last longer than an afternoon, and on the rare occasion that they went to bed angry, they made up over bowls of Captain Crunch the next morning.

And it. Was. Awesome.

Hold My Gloves

Chapter Summary

In which Sonic and Knuckles fight, hats are exchanged, and families cheer on.

Chapter Notes

The amount of comments and hits this story is getting never fails to make us breathless. You guys are amazing ❤️

Sonic's mission (now renamed *Help Knuckles Discover He's Part of the Tribe Wachowski Without Damaging Any Personal or Public Property*) had its potholes and roadblocks, but for the most part he felt as if it was going fairly smoothly.

But still, there was something that made Knuckles go quiet every so often, drifting apart from their family as if he was preparing the wall before it could be built by someone else.

And Sonic was intent on breaking it down each time.

"We need to get more grapes," Sonic would remind his dad when they were out getting groceries. "Those are Knuckles' favorites."

"I think he likes hockey," he told his mother as they drove to practice. "I saw him watching it on his phone last night. Can we go to a game?"

"I'm going to see if my friend's older siblings can come to the next practice," he told his parents early in the morning. "I think Knuckles needs more friends outside of school. I can't have him becoming a giant nerd, like Tails. No offense." (Tails, elbow deep in trying to convert the fridge to cold fusion, was too busy to be offended.)

He was so busy trying to play *best middle brother* that he may have, sort of, kind of forgotten that Knuckles was allowed to take over as a *big* brother.

And so it was a shock when Knuckles did.

"Your stance is unstable."

The echidna said it without prompting one early evening as Tom tossed him a few easy pitches, Sonic swinging the bat over his shoulder, grimacing each time he heard the telltale

whuff of the bat hitting air as the ball whizzed past. It was harder practicing without powers. His body always wanted to go faster, to go stronger, to crackle with the electricity always just beneath his skin. But his parents and the local coaches had made a deal last year when Sonic wanted to officially join a team.

No powers, or he'd be benched for the season.

So even though he would have made a stellar waterboy, Sonic wanted to play baseball enough that he'd gladly put his speed and strength to the side in order to stand on home plate.

And today, as he strained to reign himself in and whiffed *another* easy pitch from Tom, he wasn't exactly in the mood for pointers.

"My stance is fine," he grumbled, watching Tom line up another pitch. He shifted his feet.

"You are wrong!" Knuckles shouted from the back deck. Sonic startled and missed the ball by a mile. "Your stance is weak and unstable."

" *You're* weak and unstable!"

"Bud…" Tom warned, grabbing another baseball from a bucket at his feet.

"Wha- *He* keeps distracting me!"

"I am only pointing out what I see," said Knuckles. "And if I see that you are a feeble-footed boy-"

"Okay," Sonic threw down his bat and mitt. "That's it. Dad, hold my gloves!"

Tails walked out just in time to see Tom somehow duck and yank a gloveless Sonic back by the scruff just as he was speeding towards the deck.

Honestly, if G.U.N knew better, they'd have at least investigated Maddie and Tom Wachowski for superpowers. Because Tom's hand didn't look the least bit charred or broken as he hefted his kid up for a scolding that had the boy staring down at his dangling shoes.

"He started it," Tails heard Sonic mumble.

"And I'm *finishing it*. So unless you want to lose your phone for the next week-"

"But Dad-!"

"Don't even try it, Sonic." Tom lowered Sonic to the grass and handed him his mitt. "Now c'mon. You want to practice or what?"

Sonic grumbled something before stomping back to the frisbee they'd dubbed *Home Base.*

"What happened," asked Maddie, stepping out onto the porch.

Tails rolled his eyes. “Sonic and Knuckles were fighting.”

“Were *not* !” hollered Sonic, moving towards the deck, most likely to try and defend his honor. “Mom! Don’t listen to him!”

“They were,” said Tails, who was getting way too used to it, and Maddie was very afraid he’d soon be joining in. “Knuckles would’ve won anyway.”

“Would *not!”* hollered Sonic as Tom dragged him once again back to home base. “Treachery! I could’ve taken him!”

“Couldn't've,” said Tails before following his mother back inside.

Even though it rankled him to his core, Sonic asked Knuckles about what he meant during a quick snack break.

“ *If* I were to listen to you, which I *won’t* ,” he said, peeling a tangerine, “how would you explain the whole… unstable stance thing.”

Knuckles looked him up and down. “I noticed your statistics showed that you managed to capture the house base once every three games. An excellent number, but not superior to the best players on your opposing teams.”

“It’s called a *home run* . And ouch?” He threw a peel at Knuckles. “I’m not *allowed* to use powers. Remember? So I *can’t* use much more power.”

“I do not mean that you should use them. I mean that you could get much more power behind your swing with better footing.”

Sonic ripped apart one of the peels, flicking it towards the grass. “So if I *happened* to be interested in hearing more, could you maybe show me?”

Knuckles was thrilled to finally be training Sonic. He’d been offering for weeks. Hell, he’d made quips about Sonic’s lack of training the night they’d met; a more tense time that involved Sonic pinned by his neck to the oak tree.

The tree was still there when Knuckles circled Sonic, watching him hold his bat, feet carefully placed around the frisbee.

“Bend your knees more,” he said. “And your feet need to be pointed, like the time tellers.”

“You mean *clocks?”*

“This is no time for corrections. Now assume this position!”

Sonic copied Knuckles’ posture.

“When you swing your stick-”

“Bat.”

“-your back foot will move like so.”

“I *know* how to move the back foot.”

“Ha! Hardly! You are so eager to run, you do not allow your feet to move at the house!”

“Home,” corrected Sonic, but he did try out the move a few times until Knuckles deemed his stance *as good as it was going to get* for the day, and asked Dad to toss another pitch.

The *crack* of the ball was immediate, and despite not pushing his powers through the movement, the home run was a spectacular one that landed just by the treeline.

“Holy *shit!* ”

“ *Language, Sonic!”* But Tom was grinning, using his hand as a visor to squint towards where the ball landed. “Nice one, bud!”

“Ha!” Knuckles pumped one huge fist in the air. “You see?”

“Let’s try it again! I want to see if I can get more homers!”

He did. Out of the next twenty, at least sixteen landed near the little growing pile at the wall of trees behind their house.

They both bragged to Maddie when she got back from the Walter Farm after they’d called about a cow with a limp that needed attention.

“I have begun my Brother’s training!” Knuckles thumped a fist against his chest and then clapped Sonic on the back with a little too much force, grabbing the younger Wachowski by the shoulder before he could topple forward. “He is learning quickly!”

“I got, like, a *million* home runs, Mom.”

“An exaggeration, Mother, but no less exciting!”

“Wow,” said Maddie, looking over their matching grass stains. “And you’re both still in one piece, I see!”

“Very nearly weren’t,” Tom called from the back where he was tossing a ball back and forth with Tails.

“I cannot wait for his tournament on Saturday.” Knuckles beamed. “It will be thrilling to see his training in practice!”

Sonic slipped an arm around his brother’s back. “Dedicating my first home run to you!”

“First of a million, no doubt,” Knuckles said, mirroring the gesture.

Maddie put a hand to her heart. “I love it. Why don’t you guys go get a head start on washing up for bed?”

“Sure, Mom.”

“Of course, Mother.”

As the pair trotted into the house, debating whether or not a baseball could be hit hard enough to land on the moon, Maddie crossed the yard to Tom. “That was quite the turnaround!”

Tom caught the ball from Tails and shrugged. “S’what brothers do, right? Only child here, you’re the expert.”

“Yeah, yeah it is.” She turned just in time to catch the fox kit as he launched himself into her arms. “Don’t you go feel like you’ve gotta start fighting too, though.”

Tails grinned. “Nah. How come they do it so much though?”

“I think it’s because they’re so close in age,” she said. Up in the second story, the bathroom light turned on. Through the open pane, they heard the baseball-to-the-moon debate continue fervently. “They’ll probably always butt heads.”

“Doesn’t mean they don’t love each other though,” Tom said, depositing the bucket of balls in the shed and locking up.

“I know.” Tails yawned, resting his chin on Maddie’s shoulder. “I hope his paperwork gets approved.”

His mother kissed his temple. “Us too, baby. Now c’mon, let’s go make sure they don’t waste all the toothpaste.”

He laughed, and the trio climbed the deck stairs up and into the house for the night.

The tournament on Saturday was packed to the brim, and Sonic’s phone was blowing up well before they even arrived to let him know that the older siblings were setting up their own little section and that Knuckles *had* to join them.

He sent a screenshot of the text discreetly to each of his parents, and Maddie melted against the passenger seat.

And the best Middle Brother Award goes to…, she texted back.

He beamed all the way to the field.

That glee only ballooned when, true to their word, the pack of older siblings were jumping out of their cars and convening near the bleachers.

They saw Knuckles and waved, calling him over.

Knuckles looked up at Maddie. “Mother. I do not wish to… to abandon the tribe. But could I join my compatriots? Perhaps?”

She waved him off, scrubbing at her eyes when he wasn’t looking.

“God, Tom,” she whispered when the other teens dragged him into their little group, laughing and joking and heading for the stands.

“Yeah,” he said, casting a careful glance towards their middle child. “He’s doing alright.”

Whatever thoughts would’ve been spoken next were cut off when Tom’s parents pulled up into the parking lot, swarming their other two grandchildren. But even they noticed. Especially when they all found seats, and Rosie looked over to see Knuckles chatting animatedly with another teenage boy about something on the boy’s phone.

“Goodness, that’s a nice sight!”

“Yeah.” Tom nodded. “Hope he’s feeling as happy as he looks.”

Knuckles took that moment to leap up as the teams began to walk onto the field, shouting at the top of his lungs, “GO BROTHER! THRASH YOUR ENEMIES!”

“Sounds like he’s doing just fine,” said Big T while the little group of teenagers joined in on the archaic goading.

And thrash them he did, though in the most sportsmanlike way of course, all the way to a second place finish (would’ve been first, but for one bad call by an umpire that had his whole family and a few of his teammates’ parents up in arms in the stands). But it didn’t matter that they didn’t bring home the biggest trophy. They still got to go out for barbecue afterwards, the five of them, plus Tom’s parents, and Sonic never once felt like he was standing on the sidelines. Not even when Tails spent most of dinner in Grandma Rosie’s lap, or when Grandpa T presented Knuckles with a Stetson of his very own.

The echidna turned the hat over in his hands reverently. “This is-” his voice cracked and he cleared his throat, “I will try to be worthy of this honor you have bestowed upon me, Grandfather.”

Tom Sr. chuckled. “Thought you’d like it.”

“Like it? It is the Crown of the Clan!” Knuckles said, holding it aloft with pride. “I believe this means I now outrank Father, correct?”

Tom Jr. shook his head while Maddie hid a laugh behind her glass of iced tea. “Incorrect.”

“S’just a hat,” Tails said, drowning his basket of french fries in ketchup.

“A hat that makes you look like a dork,” Sonic added, carefully separating the onion from his onion rings.

“Then why does Father not have one?” Knuckles wanted to know. “If he were meant to be the patriarchal successor, surely he would have-”

“He does,” Maddie piped up, and everyone turned.

“What??” Sonic sat up.

“Really?” Tails chirped.

“Hon…” Tom was sinking into his seat.

Maddie smirked. “It’s tucked away up in his closet now, but he used to wear it *all* the time back in college.”

Sonic and Tails burst into laughter.

“No way!”

“Can we see it?”

Tom groaned and Maddie bumped against him playfully. Then the sheriff looked at the face of his eldest son -hesitant, expectant, awed- and he softened. “Sure, I can dig it out sometime soon.”

Tails cheered. Sonic rolled his eyes. Knuckles nodded approvingly, then placed his own hat on his head.

“Do we get them too?” Tails wanted to know.

“If you want,” Big T said. “You’re Wachowski boys, after all.”

“Yes!”

Sonic watched Knuckles’ whole face light up, then caught Maddie’s eye across the table. She winked at him. Grinning, he settled back in his chair, licked hot sauce from his fingers and-

It. Was. Awesome.

Aunt Rachel

Chapter Summary

In which a visit with extended family is arranged.

The barbeque had been Rachel's idea.

She'd called a few days before their Spring Break was set to begin. Sonic had been the one to see Maddie's phone light up. Usually, he felt comfortable enough to answer and bring the phone to her. Most of her friends were used to hearing his voice as he chatted with them on the way to find his Mother.

This time, he'd brought it to her quietly before zipping away, listening to her speak crisply to her sister, and heard the shock when she'd said, *you want to come here?* He did his best to train his face for the rest of the day, hoping he didn't look too nervous, but he was too quiet over dinner, forgetting to separate the vegetables from his pasta (a very confused Ozzie sitting at his feet without getting even one green bean).

"You good, Bud?" Tom had asked.

"Huh?" Sonic blinked, catching his mother's eye before quickly looking away. "Uh, yeah. Fine."

The worst part of it was that Knuckles looked concerned.

And that wasn't fair.

Sonic was meant to be helping *him* , not cowering because some family member a few hundred miles away wanted to have a get together.

Maddie and Tom pretended not to be surprised, but Sonic could see the way they'd whispered after dinner over the sink, Tom's hands dunked in the sink, Maddie holding a rag, waiting to dry.

"… *still has that asshole* …"

"… I don't trust them either but…"

Tails was sitting on the stairs when Knuckles and Sonic found him, taking a seat on the steps above and below.

"They've been talking for a while," Tails whispered, fiddling with the banister.

Sonic nodded.

Knuckles gave Sonic a long look, brow furrowed. “Something has clouded your mind, Brother.”

“No. I’m fine…”

“You are *not*.” Knuckles gave his shoulder a kick with a socked foot. “Tell me.”

“You don’t need to worry about it, man.”

“I wish to worry. I am your elder Brother. That is my job.”

That was at least a little bit of a reassurance, and Sonic thought that maybe, just maybe, giving Knuckles a chance to feel like he was the older brother, that he did have some authority here, would be better than pretending none of this was happening.

“Rachel and Jojo want to visit with Grampa T and Gramma Rosie.”

Knuckles did his best to lower his voice. “And that’s bad?”

“When she’s got *Randall* there, yeah.” Sonic swallowed. “And she’s never really… liked me, much.”

Tails tucked his knees to his chest. “Do you think he’ll try to hurt us here?”

“Mom wouldn’t let him.” But even Sonic didn’t look sure, clutching the banister tight. “And as long as none of his friends show up-”

There was a sound in the kitchen, the sink turning off.

And then Tom’s voice; “Boys?”

The three aliens were already scurrying up the stairs, hushing each other all the way to the attic.

Their secrecy only lasted so long, when Maddie was popping her head up the attic stairs just a few hours later. Tails was getting ready for bed, tugging off his socks, and Sonic was on the top bunk with his reading light on, comic book in his hand. Knuckles, in a rare move, was fiddling with Sonic's hand-me-down Gameboy on the beanbag, apparently trusted enough to hold the delicate toy.

She walked across the floor, picking up a pair of shoes, setting them to the side, glancing up at her middle child. “You turning in early, hon?”

He hummed something about *just reading* as she ducked down, pulling up Tails’ covers. There was an exchange ("g'night Mom. love you" - "love you too, sweetheart. see you in the morning") before she was standing up and peeking over the top bunk. "Sonic. Could you come down for a sec?"

He set down his comic, brows pinched nervously. "Am I… did I do something?"

Knuckles looked up for only a moment, before looking down again, the soft noises of Mario Kart singing from the tinny speakers.

"No, honey. We just want to talk."

Tom was just finishing brushing his teeth when Sonic and Maddie sat on the bed. He rustled around his drawer, pulling out a soft, worn t-shirt. “You want this, bud?” Sonic nodded, reaching towards it. Tom joined them, tugging the shirt over Sonic’s head before pulling the boy towards him. Tom smelled like aftershave and mint toothpaste, and Sonic leaned back against his father's chest.

"So." Maddie crossed her legs, knees bumping Sonic's feet, "Your aunt Rachel wants to stay here a few days."

Sonic nodded slowly. "Yeah…" He glanced up at Tom. "I already knew that."

"We want to know how you feel about it."

"Why?"

Tom pinched his ear. "Because, bud, we don't want anyone coming here that's going to make you feel lousy in your own home."

Sonic opened his mouth, closing it again. Maddie reached out and cupped his face. "I won't be offended, sweetheart."

"But she's your sister-"

"And you're my son." Her fingers migrated behind his ears, giving them a careful scratch. "You come first. Always."

"Really…?"

"Really."

Tom untangled one of his quills, raking his hand through. “Up to you, kid. You can wait and think about it tonight.”

Their son picked at a stray bit of dog fur on the duvet. “No, I can- it’s okay if she comes.”

Maddie looked over his head at Tom. “You sure, honey?” She glanced back down at him, tanning his paws in her hands. It was rare that he was ungloved, and she carefully moved her fingers against his claws. “If you’re not sure, that’s okay. Really. I won’t be upset.”

“And Grampa T and Gramma Rosie are coming over still, bud.” Tom leaned down kissing his son between the ears. “They’re excited to visit you. Got a whole plan to teach you how to use the barbeque, no matter how much I told him that it was a bad idea.”

“I know. But-”

“But?”

“But I want to see Jojo.” He traced the lines of Maddie’s hand with his claws. “We’ve been playing online, and I want to see her *here* . She- she knows she’s my cousin.” He shrugged, looking away. “I don’t think Rachel knows who I am.” He swallowed. “Or- or what. And now that there’s three of- of us-”

Maddie grimaced, squeezing his hand in hers. “She shouldn’t have said that at the wedding.”

“S’okay.”

“It’s *not*.”

Ozzie must have sensed a big talk going on without him, because he chose that moment to trot into the room, jumping onto the bed. He spun twice on the duvet before nosing his head onto Sonic’s lap.

The hedgehog huffed through a weak smile, ducking down to press his cheek against Ozzie’s neck, his own bare paws scratching gently across the dog’s back. Ozzie let out a content sigh, tongue lolling.

As slobbery as the dog was, Sonic would be remiss in forgetting what a comfort Ozzie could be.

“Take the night,” Maddie said, reaching down to smudge a missed splotch of dried toothpaste on the corner of Sonic’s mouth. “Think about it, alright?”

“Kay,” he muttered into the dog’s scruff.

“I love you.”

He nodded, words tangled up in golden fur. “Love you too, mom.”

Tom gave his shoulder a nudge. “You wanna sleep here tonight?”

Sonic shook his head, and then added after a thought; “Can Ozzie come up?”

It took barely any convincing (the dog always trying and failing to join his favorite person upstairs) and Ozzie bounded upwards at the chance of spending the night with his beloved hedgehog, running little circles across the attic floor loud enough to wake a dozing Knuckles who had drifted off mid race and a now giggling Tails just hard enough to almost fall off the bed.

The same fox kit was nearly speechless when his older brother shyly asked if they could share the bottom bunk, since Ozzie couldn’t get up, and he'd rather the dog not drool all over his Yankee duvet. And so the three of them (a blue supersonic hedgehog, a two tailed flying fox, and a hollow headed dog), were squeezed into the twin mattress; a tangle of tails and quills and t-shirts and bare paws.

"You going back down, Knux?" Tom was drawing up the covers over his two youngest, peeking over his shoulder at the red echidna.

Knuckles stretched. "No," he said, mid yawn. "I believe I am needed here tonight. For support."

Knuckles climbed up the ladder, Tom reaching up to scratch a hand down his eldests back as the boy hauled himself sleepily over the rail.

Tom ducked back down. “Night, you two.”

It was earlier than Sonic would normally go to bed (allowed to stay up a recently negotiated *two* hours after their eight year old instead of the previous one and a half), but he was already yawning, and Tails looked giddy enough for the company. “Night, Dad,” Tails chirped, Sonic echoing him.

They got kisses and exchanged dramatic *I Love You’s*.

Tom could hear them whispering as he descended.

Your claws are digging into my legs!

Then get your legs off my claws!

If you both do not stop fighting, I shall throw one of you out the window. Then there will be no reason to yell about claws.

As if you could throw me!

“I could take Rachel hating me.” Their whispered threats faded behind the closed door as Tom climbed into bed, watching Maddie rub lotion on her arms, her hair already tied up into a scarf. The room smelled like lavender. “But that poor kid- he knows it more than the other two.”

“I know.” Maddie closed the lotion with a *pop* sitting back against the pillows. “I know we said it was up to him, but I’m tempted to tell her not to even bother.”

“Mads…”

“Two of *them*,” Maddie hissed. “That’s what she said, when they came out of the portal. *Oh God, now there’s two of them.*”

“I know.”

“He’s my *son*, Tom. Our son. Our *sons*.”

“I know, Mads.”

“I mean, think about how much we were there for her when Jojo was born. Think about how much we *love* her kid. And to think-”

He grabbed her hand tight. “I know.”

She dropped her head back against the headboard with a soft *thunk* . “I don’t know what to do, Tom.”

He leaned over, kissing her jaw. “Don’t worry about it now. Sonic’s a smart kid. He’ll make the decision he’s ready to make. Doesn’t mean we can’t talk to Rachel too. Set up some ground rules.”

“I guess.”

He kissed her again before pulling her down beside him. “We’ll figure it out together.”

“We always do.”

Their fingers stayed linked beneath the covers, the whispers above their heads finally teetering off to silence.

Maddie and Tom weren’t shocked that their son could make his own choices. He’d always been independent, but it always surprised them just how mature he was when the moment was right.

Sitting down at the kitchen island, he tapped his still gloveless paws against the counter, claws ticking, as Tom stood at the stove, eggs hissing away, Maddie dipping the tea bag into hot water.

“I want Rachel to come here.”

In Tom’s oversized Green Hills PD shirt he looked so incredibly small. And yet he sat taller, eyes nervous but steady.

Tom flipped the eggs, sliding them onto a plate before cracking another two into the pan. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.” He lifted his chin a little higher. “It’s okay if she doesn’t like me. But I want her here anyway. Because I’d never want anyone to keep me out. I remember what that was like, and I won’t do that to her, either. So… I’m okay if she comes here.” He swallowed, ears flattening. “What do you think?”

Maddie smiled, a little watery, and leaned on the island to reach across and take his hand in hers. His claws scratched her wrist, and she squeezed tight. “I think that’s a very adult thing to say.”

His own smile was just as watery, and she put down her tea, letting go of his hand to round the island and pull him into a hug, pressing loud kisses against his cheek. “My little boy is so *grown up*,” she cooed between kisses, until he was laughing again, the little chorus of *mom, stop!* only interrupted once Tails hobbled through in his own long shirt, yawning, fur skewed, Knuckles close behind demanding kisses from Mother.

There were eggs and orange juice, and Tom and Knuckles debated whether or not he was old enough for coffee yet (the verdict was still a firm *no*). Ozzie sat at their feet, waiting for Sonic to pass him eggs when Tom's back was turned.

And despite the impending potential awkward family reunion, Sonic couldn't help that think that-

It. Was. Awesome.

A Surprise and a Fresh Start

Chapter Summary

In which Aunt Rachel and Jojo arrive.

The next few days passed by too slowly, with Sonic fielding as many questions as he could about Rachel and Jojo and Randall to his two new brothers.

Yes, Rachel is Mom's sister.

Yes, that makes us her nephews.

No, I can't tell you if she's happy about that.

Yes, Randall is the worst.

Yes, his muscles are definitely fake.

Absolutely, Tom is much better dad material.

No, Tom would not win in a fight against Randall, and would in fact be pulverized.

No, Jojo is not secret service.

Yes, she is very nice, but that does not mean you may show mercy when playing Nintendo.

So it was a surprise when, the night before they were set to arrive, Sonic got a text from Jojo long after he was supposed to be asleep.

JOJO [10:13 PM]: Hey cuz!

Sonic squinted against the glare of his phone through the dark.

SONIC [10:14 PM]: Why are u awake???

JOJO [10:16 PM]: Why aren't u!

SONIC [10:17 PM]: Because it's 10:17

JOJO [10:19 PM]: Didn't know you were BORING!

JOJO [10:19 PM]: And it's only 9:19 here.

JOJO [10:20 PM]: Oops

He snorted, rolling onto his back, phone above his head. Below him, Tails let out a gentle sigh, muttering something softly in his sleep. Sonic held his breath, waiting for his younger brother to settle before texting again.

SONIC [10:23 PM]: I'm a growing boi. I need my sleep.

SONIC [10:23 PM]: Besides, need to prep so I can beat you down at Mario Kart.

JOJO [10:25 PM]: Cap!

JOJO [10:27 PM]: Speaking of which, I'll see you TOMORROW!! (counting down the minutes!)

SONIC [10:29 PM]: Better spend all the time with me you can.

SONIC [10:31PM]: Randall's tryin to put my head on a wall.

SONIC [10:32 PM]: Sorry if he's ur new step-dad or somethin. Sure he's great.

SONIC [10:34 PM]: If he's not I hate him tho

JOJO [10:36 PM]: ???

JOJO [10:36 PM]: Did Aunt Maddie not tell you???

SONIC [10:34 PM]: Tell me wut?

JOJO [10:37 PM]: Mom broke up with Randall weeks ago dude

SONIC [10:38 PM]: WUUUUUUUT?????

A million scenarios cropped up.

Sonic had only known Randell for about two hours, but those two hours had consisted of being cornered, tasered, and then locked up in a military-grade dog crate. The idea that he would be at their house had been scary enough.

But if Randall had been dumped, he'd probably be mad about it, right? And government agents were bad enough when they were in a *good* mood. One out for revenge was even *worse* .

JOJO [10:39 PM]: Hated his guts anyway. He hit my cousin. Blood comes first!

Relief washing over him, Sonic's grin could have split his face in half, and he covered his mouth with the pillow to keep from waking Tails up with a giddy laugh.

SONIC [10:40 PM]: We don't even share blood!

SONIC [10:40 PM]: Alien remember?

JOJO [10:45 PM]: [a GIF of Stitch explaining ohana]

JOJO [10:46 PM]: Cmon man you know better than that

SONIC [10:48 PM]: Glad you're coming

JOJO [10:48 PM]: Me too <3 See you TOMORROW!! [GIF of Wayne and Garth going 'PARTY TIME! EXCELLENT!'

They spent the next five minutes trading GIFs of various party-related things, before finally bidding each other goodnight. As Sonic set his phone on silent, he smiled to himself. Maybe it would be a good visit after all.

There was an anxious thrum about the house. Maddie and Tom were scrubbing down every surface and had Sonic and Tails cleaning their room at least two times, dragging the air mattress into the attic for Jojo while the spare bedroom was set up for Rachel.

"Don't you think Jojo'll be nervous to meet us," Tails whispered while he stacked books back onto their shelves.

"Nah. Jojo's cool. She won't even blink. It's Rachel I'm worried about."

"Because she doesn't like you?"

"Pretty much."

"Do you think she'll like me?"

Sonic stiffened. *Oh God, there's two of them* still echoed around whenever he thought too long about it. He'd been awake to hear that little gem, and he was almost grateful Tails had been long knocked out when the words were spoken.

"Dunno," he lied. "But I don't think anyone doesn't like you."

"Boys!" Maddie called up the steps, "it'd better be spotless up there when I check!"

There was a groaned chorus of *yes mom* before they heard her moving quickly down the hall, probably to remake the guest bed for the third time. Outside, they could hear Tom mowing the lawn as quickly as he could.

"I hope she likes Knuckles," Tails said quietly. "Do you think she will?"

And that was a whole other issue Sonic was trying not to think about. They were already battling G.U.N through the legal system as it was. He knew how much Knuckles was trying not to think about those impending files floating somewhere just outside of Green Hills, moving from desk to desk. Knew how much influence G.U.N had, and how much they were using it to push back against the Wachowskis in any way they could.

Like Maddie said; they couldn't touch Sonic and Tails, not with a lawsuit hanging over their heads and payouts just to fix their house. Twice.

But Knuckles was free game.

Judge Ramirez knew it. Their parents knew it. Knuckles knew it.

And the idea that Randall might now have some sort of a vendetta against his kind of sort of Aunt?

Sonic quickly changed the subject. “Here, you wanna sort these?” He handed the Pokemon cards over to Tails. “I’ll finish vacuuming.”

Hearing the loud whir of the vacuum was a comfort. It filled his head just enough and kept him from wondering if all of this might have been a huge mistake.

Oh well.

Too late now.

A quarter past noon, Maddie got a text that had her and Tom lining all of their kids up on the front porch just as a car rumbled its way down the drive.

“Well,” Tom muttered, “no going back now.”

“Nope,” whispered Maddie.

Tails reached over and grabbed Sonic’s hand as the car came to a slow stop. Sonic gave it a squeeze. “You’ll be fine,” he promised, turning to check on Knuckles, who was stiffly standing beside him, eyes hard. On impulse, he reached out and took hold of Knuckles’ hand too.

Violet eyes darted his way, just a flash of fear, and then the big hand clenched tight enough to cut off the circulation in his fingers.

The car rolled to a stop, cut the engine. Ozzie leapt off the porch, bounding down, tail wagging, head-empty. The back passenger-side door opened and JoJo hopped out, met with golden retriever kisses as her laughter floated out among the trees. “Hi guys!”

Over their heads, Sonic heard his mother blow out a breath and his father call, “What’s shakin’, bacon?”

That got Jojo laughing all over again.

The driver’s door opened and Rachel stepped out. Instead of turning to the family on the porch though, she addressed her daughter. “Get the bags out of the backseat, baby.”

“Oh right!” Beaming, the pre-teen ducked back into the car, and reemerged with three gift bags, one red, one yellow, one blue.

Tails lifted himself up on tip-toes. “Are those-?”

As Jojo jogged forward with the bags, Ozzie at her heels, Rachel crossed to the passenger side and pulled out a reusable grocery bag. “Just a little, you know, a token. Doesn’t go far enough on the ‘I’m sorry scale’, but it’s a start?”

Sonic froze, feeling his brothers do the same. Behind him, he swore he heard his Dad draw in a quick breath. He didn’t feel when the bag was pushed into his chest by a bouncing Jojo. He only saw when Rachel approached the stairs, staying just below.

“Rachel,” Maddie began, but her sister shook her head.

“I’ve got a lot to say sorry for. To both you and Tom and your- Well. Figured it was better to do it in person.”

Maddie’s smile softened. “Yeah, Rach. That- that sounds great.”

Rachel smiled back, though it trembled at the edges.

“Why don’t you come in?” Tom did his best to break the awkward silence that hung between the sisters. “You’re probably starving. And we’re gonna grill hamburgers.”

“Really!” Jojo hopped up the steps. “You *know* that’s my favorite, Uncle Tommy.”

“Is it? I didn’t even remember that!”

“*Uncle Tommy.*”

Tails and Knuckles began to head into the house, Sonic moving to follow them until;
“Sonic?”

He twisted around to look down at Rachel. “Uh… yeah?”

“You mind helping me with some of the bags?”

“Um…” He looked back at the house where the rest of his family had already vanished. Carefully, he set down the little blue gift bag. “Sure.”

There wasn’t much to gather. Just two light duffel bags that she could have carried on her own, which seemed strange until Rachel was pausing at the open trunk to look down at the hedgehog. “I haven’t exactly been the best Aunt, have I?”

He swallowed, pausing mid-grab of the first bag.

She knelt down, closer to eye level. “You don’t have to answer that. I know. But… I was hoping…” and suddenly Rachel looked just as nervous as he did. “We never really got introduced. And that was my fault, I know. So I was thinking, maybe we could start fresh?”

After a beat of silence, Sonic realized that she was waiting for him to answer. He’d never had this sort of power over anyone before; never thought anyone would come pleading to *him* , knowing he could reasonably reject them.

“Oh,” he said. “Um… are you sure?”

Her eyes were sad when she nodded. “I’m sure.”

“But- what about Randall?” He looked away. “I didn’t tell my Mo- your sister about that.”

“You could’ve.”

“I didn’t know if it really happened.”

She nodded slowly. “It did.”

“Oh.” Biting his lip, he chanced another look up at her. “Why?”

“Because he hurt my family.”

“He didn’t hit Maddie…”

“I know that.”

“Oh.” He looked down at his shoes.

“You don’t have to decide anything now,” she said kindly. “I just want to make sure you know that I’m here. When you’re ready. And if you’re not ever ready that’s fine too. I’m not exactly winning family member of the year. But I want to try again. My sister deserves that. And so do you.”

Sonic wasn’t sure if anything she said was true. About Randall. About her. But the way she was watching him; he knew what it felt like to be alone. He’d told his parents that. How he’d spent so long on the outskirts, wanting so badly to be a part of a family.

Rachel had done a lot wrong. But if she was willing to do things right, then he wasn’t sure he wanted her trying from the outskirts, looking in.

His family was growing. Who was he to stop it?

Slowly, he raised an unsure hand, lifting his chin. “Um. Hi,” he began. “I’m Sonic.”

Her eyes shone when she reached out to clasp his hand in hers. “It’s very, *very* nice to meet you, Sonic. I’m your Aunt. Rachel.”

When he smiled, he was shocked that it felt sincere. “It’s nice to meet you, too, Aunt Rachel.”

She gave his hand a squeeze. “How about you introduce me to your brothers. I’m dying to meet them. Really meet them, I mean.”

He squeezed her hand back. “They’re excited to meet you too. *Really* meet you.”

With a laugh, Rachel closed the trunk, and followed Sonic into the house.

Getting To Know You (for the first time)

Chapter Summary

In which a surprisingly-normal family visit takes place.

Chapter Notes

Happy Birthday to patchedhobbes over on Tumblr! ^_^ Here's a good long chapter for you! And everyone else, too! ^_~

The other two boys were just as apprehensive at first when Rachel came through, dropping off her bags by the stairs and joining the rest of the family on the back porch. Tom broke the tension by extracting a six-pack of beer from the grocery bag he'd been handed earlier. "Anchor? Oh man, I haven't had this since college! Talk about a nostalgia trip. Thanks, Rach."

"Want me to go put them in the fridge?" she offered, jerking a thumb back at the french doors.

"Nah, I got it. Forgot my lighter anyway." He paused as he passed her, patting her shoulder. They exchanged tentative smiles before he continued on into the house.

"Mom, Mom!" Tails tugged at the hem of Maddie's shorts. "Can we open these? I never got a gift before! Can we?"

Before Maddie could answer, Rachel was saying, "Absolutely! It's why we brought 'em, after all!"

Tails had tossed the tissue paper aside before the other two could even blink and with a shriek of excitement, he extracted a K'nex kit of the Golden Gate Bridge. "It's the place! From Dad's t-shirt!"

"It *is!* " Maddie said, stroking the fur between his ears. She turned wide eyes to her sister. *'They're not cheap,'* she mouthed, as her youngest went to the table to open the box.

Rachel waved her off, settling herself down in an adirondack so she was closer to the boy's eye-level. "Go on." She gestured at Sonic and Knuckles.

The older boys looked at each other, then Sonic shrugged, and they both dug into their bags. “Woah!” Sonic said as he lifted a UC Berkley baseball jersey out of his bag. “Mom, isn’t this where-”

“-Dad and I went to college, yeah,” Maddie nodded. “Dad even played for the team his freshman year.”

“You’re *kidding??* ”

“Kidding about what?” Tom asked as he reappeared on the deck.

“Dad! You played baseball??” Sonic was on his father in a heartbeat, brandishing the jersey. “Why didn’t you tell me!”

Tom’s ears went red. “Wasn’t that great at it, bud,” he said, twirling the long-neck lighter in his hands.

“Psh, yeah right!” Sonic rolled his eyes. “Do you still have the jersey?”

“I mean, probably-”

“Let’s go get it! Right now!” Excitedly the hedgehog tugged on the human’s hand. “Then we can match!”

“I don’t know where it is-”

“Same box as the Stetson,” Maddie supplied helpfully, stepping forward to take the lighter from him. “I can get the grill started.”

As the two of them went back inside yet again, Jojo sat down on the arm of her mother’s chair, the woman looping an arm around the girl and squeezing.

Then Jojo turned to Knuckles, “You gonna open yours?”

The echidna started at being addressed. “Oh, er, yes.” The bag he held was bigger than the other two, and he understood why when he pushed the tissue paper aside and found a pine green yoga mat with matching block and resistance bands.

“So you don’t have to borrow your mom’s anymore,” Jojo explained.

He blinked, hard, and Maddie put an arm around his shoulders, pulling him against her side. “That was *very* thoughtful,” she said. He nodded, cleared his throat and then still couldn’t seem to find his voice. “You wanna take them to your room?” Another nod, and he shuffled off.

“You didn’t have to do all that, Rach.” Maddie watched her eldest descend into the basement before turning towards her sister and niece. “They’ll say thank you later, but you really didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to.”

“Mom asked me to ask Sonic what everyone liked!” supplied Jojo.

“And you couldn’t have done better. They *love* them.”

Maddie twisted around to light the grill. Jojo, listening to the racket going on inside, was drawn through the french doors, pulling Tails along with her, leaving the two sisters on the porch by themselves.

Rachel fiddled with the decorative hole in her jeans.

“That was really nice of you.” Maddie began to click the lighter, waiting for the gas to catch a hold of the flame. “I’m glad that you decided to-”

“I’m sorry.”

Maddie paused, turning back around and lowering the lid on the grill.

“I don’t think I’ve been the best sister. Or sister in law. Or aunt.”

“Rach-”

“No… No, I’ve got to say this.”

Slowly, Maddie moved towards her sister, sitting in the adjacent chair.

“Things haven’t really been easy,” said Maddie. “I mean… I moved farther away to the middle of nowhere with my college boyfriend. And then Mom and Dad getting sick, and then Randall- we didn’t have a lot of time to be sisters.”

“I know that. But it isn’t an excuse.” Rachel drew in a long breath. “And, I don’t know if you heard-”

“Sonic told me.” At Rachel’s questioning look, Maddie explained, “Jojo told him.”

“Oh.” Rachel nodded. “It was- I mean, the entire thing. It hurt. Thinking he loved me, and finding out that it was all just a ploy.” She dragged in a long breath, letting it out. “But what was worse, was realizing later on that I hadn’t even stood up for my- my nephews. That he hurt my family, and I didn’t do *anything* .”

Maddie’s jaw twitched. There wasn’t any defense for that, and the images of her boy seizing beneath an electrified net were stuck behind her eyes. “You helped get him out,” she offered.

“But I didn’t stand up for him. That wasn’t the reason I was- I mean shit, Mads.”

“Yeah.”

“And having to watch that? I’m sorry you did.”

“ *Yeah* ,” she said again.

“I haven’t exactly been fair to Tom. Or to your kids. Because they are *your* kids and *your* family.”

Carefully, Maddie reached across the space and took her sister’s hand. “Well. You’re trying now. And we’re really happy to give it a shot if you are.”

Their moment was interrupted by a victorious shout from the second floor. Maddie laughed. “They must’ve found the shirt. Which. Thanks for that, again. Sonic and Tom are kind of attached at the hip. It’ll be Hell trying to wrangle him out of it once it’s on.”

“He’s a good kid. I mean- they’re all good kids.”

“They are. They’re a handful, but they’re a *great* handful.” Maddie grinned. “You know, Sonic’s got a game this Saturday. You’ll still be here. Maybe-”

“Oh, absolutely. Couldn’t stop us from coming.”

From the second floor, one of the windows was rammed open, Sonic’s head poking out. “MOM!” he hollered. “MOM, WE FOUND THE HAT. WE’RE GONNA MAKE DAD WEAR IT!”

“They’re not!” Tom called from somewhere else in the room.

“WE ARE.” The head popped back inside, and then right back out. “OH. AND GRANDPA AND GRAMMA JUST PULLED IN!”

“Sonic, you don’t have to tell the entire world everything, hon.”

“YES I DO.”

“Told you,” Maddie laughed. “A handful.”

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Big T came through the door first, Grandma Rosie right behind, and while Maddie and Rachel went to greet them (“*it’s so nice to see you again, Rachel!”* - “*well, shoot, we haven’t seen you since the weddin’.”*) Sonic took that chance to drag his Dad down in matching jerseys, a Stetson stuck a little too hard onto Tom’s head. Knuckles paraded up the stairs with his own, declaring them co-leaders until his Brothers (and Mother) could get their own.

“Tonight, we shall be your protectors,” Knuckles announced, before tripping on the carpet.

“I feel safer already, sweetheart,” Grandma Rosie cooed.

There was a proper barbeque on the porch. Jojo and Sonic explained the rules of hide and go seek to Tails and Knuckles, who were intrigued enough to give it a shot, and three of the children quickly went in all directions while Sonic counted against the shed.

It was something of an emotional moment when Sonic shyly asked, “did’ja see where Jojo went, Aunt Rachel?” and she held back tears to tell him there wasn’t a chance on Earth she

was betraying her daughter and to find her himself.

"*He called me Aunt Rachel,"* she hissed after Sonic rolled his eyes and zipped off. "I didn't- I mean that was *so fast*."

"Yeah, that kid gets you when you least expect it," said Maddie.

Tom saluted Rachel with his beer. "Welcome to the Crying Club. I'd say we'll get t-shirts made, but I think my drawers are overflowing at this point."

They ate dinner while the sun was still up, and once it had burned itself out against the trees, they sat around the bonfire. Tom brought down his guitar at the kids' behest and pretended he didn't know how to play it for the first minute before taking requests. The kids went into the woods and grabbed sticks for marshmallows. Tails showed off his new blueprints, flushing at compliments, and the grandparents asked Knuckles all about his new school and what he liked the most, absolutely thrilled when he mentioned the farm visits he'd been enjoying. Sonic bragged about baseball and cajoled the other three into a short game that he won (of course) until Big T and Rosie finally declared that it was well beyond their bedtime and that the cars weren't going to drive themselves no matter how much Tails promised that they *would* if they'd just let him tinker with it for once.

There were hugs and kisses, and lots of waving from the front porch.

And then all four kids were downstairs in new, matching pajamas from Rosie to bid parents goodnight.

"You got everything you need, baby?" Rachel asked, fussing with the silk scarf Jojo was still learning to tie herself.

"Yup," she nodded.

"Are you sure. If you need *anything* -"

"I'll be *fine*, Mom."

Maddie was hovering over her own kids. It was later than Tails was used to, and he was swaying on his feet as Maddie brushed back his fur and murmured something about him needing a haircut soon before kissing him goodnight.

"And you," she said, turning to Sonic. "No staying up too late."

"Who said I would!"

She gave him a look. "You and Jojo don't need to stay up all night talking. Got it?"

"We *won't.*"

"Sonic."

"Ugh. Can't you just *trust* me on this one, Mom."

“No.” She smoothed down his quills, and leaned in to press a goodnight kiss to his head, but he pushed her back. “Not when there’s *company*, Mom!”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Am I ruining your *image*?”

“Yes!” He looked behind Maddie towards Rachel and Jojo, and when he saw them turn away, he raised up on his feet and whispered, “*quickly*.”

She rolled her eyes. “I love you, baby.”

“You can’t call me that when- just- *ugh! Loveyoutoo.* Now *hurry!*”

Maddie peppered him with noisy kisses until Rachel turned back around and he shoved her off again.

Knuckles was not so reserved, accepting all of the snuggles she would give him, tail waggling happily.

Tom came back from walking Ozzie and didn’t listen to anything Sonic said as he dragged the boy into a hug, even as the blue hedgehog wriggled away.

“You gotta pay the *toll*, bud!”

“*Dad!”* Sonic finally zipped out of Tom’s arms, face pink.

Rachel looked at Tom. “Pay the toll?”

“Oh, it’s this cute thing that Sonic started,” Tom explained. Behind him. Sonic’s eyes blew wide. “It’s so sweet. See, before he goes to bed, he likes to get in a good snuggle or two-”

“Dad! *Stop!”*

“What! I can’t talk about you-”

“*Dad, oh my god, I swear!”*

Tom finally relented when it looked like Sonic’s head was going to explode, and their parents released them to run up the stairs, Sonic shouting “*goodnight Aunt Rachel!”* before vanishing over the landing, Knuckles heading towards the basement after another hug from Maddie.

Rachel gave Jojo a goodnight kiss before she was scampering up after her cousins, giggling and whispering and most definitely about to stay up way after they were supposed to.

Maddie sighed. “Well. That’s that, I guess.”

Rachel watched up the steps, listening to the sounds of footprints while Maddie went to go get herself and Tom another beer.

“They’re just kids.”

Coming back around the corner, Maddie handed her sister a can before heading towards the couch, Tom just behind her. “What’s that?”

“The boys.” Rachel moved towards the armchair, settling down. “They’re just — they’re just *kids* .”

Tom snorted. “Well- yeah. What did you expect? Crazy aliens levitating stuff and trying to invade our thoughts with crazy face hugger telekinesis?” At Rachel’s silence, he scoffed. “Oh, wait, *really?”*

“I wasn’t sure.”

Tipping forward, wiping at her eyes, Maddie couldn’t help but laugh. “Rach!”

“How was I supposed to know!”

“You could have *asked!”* Maddie laughed again. The idea that Sonic, who flushed if he was even *touched* by his parents in front of friends, could be some sort of intergalactic face hugger was almost too funny to bear.

“Yeah. You’re- you’re right.” Her voice was mournful, but even she couldn’t stop the laughter from bubbling over, joining the two giggling parents in front of her. “They’re just *kids*.”

“Mmmhm! They have hobbies and extracurriculars and feelings and *everything*.”

“They talk back, too,” added Tom. “And think we don’t notice when they feed Ozzie their vegetables.”

“That’s mostly Sonic,” Madide said.

Tom grinned “Once in a while they’re even grounded!”

“Jojo too.” Rachel scrubbed her face, smile almost painfully set. “God. They’re just *kids* .”

“You keep saying that!”

“And it keeps being true!”

Their laughter ebbed and flowed and finally died down to soft, breathless chuckles. Above their heads, they could hear the distinct sound of matching laughter, followed by a host of *shh shh shh don’t let Mom and Dad hear!*

Maddie sighed happily, sinking lower in her seat, beer resting on her stomach. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, not many kids can break the sound barrier or carry my car to the shop when it has a flat-”

“-or fly a bi-plane,” Tom added, kicking his feet up on the coffee table.

“But most days, it’s bizarrely normal around here,” Maddie said.

Rachel was quiet a moment, eyes on the ceiling. “I’m sorry we didn’t come,” she said at last, “to his, uh, the signing at the courthouse.”

The Wachowskis looked at each other. Tom put a hand on Maddie’s thigh, then said, “Well, you might have another shot at that.”

“Hmm? Oh! Oh, you’re already- with the other two?”

“Trying anyway.” Maddie laid a hand over Tom’s and squeezed.

“Yeah, your ex’s boss is trying to throw a wrench in the whole thing,” Tom muttered.

Rachel scoffed. “Can you even call him an ‘ex’ when the whole thing was a lie from the start?”

“S’pose that’s fair,” he conceded. “But you *did* take him back-”

“Tom,” Maddie chided.

“Am I wrong?”

“Still, it’s rude to-”

“No, no, he’s right,” Rachel sighed, and both of them turned to look at her again. She took a sip of her beer, then set it on the side table. “You know, when he asked me to dinner the first time, I swore up and down it had to be a stunt, a joke, whatever. I mean, what could this tall, handsome, put-together guy want with a single mom who hasn’t gotten a child support payment since her thirteen-year-old was three? I kept… waiting for the other shoe to drop. I figured it *had* to at some point. But then he *proposed*. And when he put that ring on my finger, I *finally* let all those doubts fall away.”

“Rach…” Maddie said softly.

“To say I was humiliated in Hawaii doesn’t even come *close*,” her sister continued. “I was furious at him, sure, but also at *myself*. For falling for it. For letting myself believe it. Because I wanted to believe it so bad.” She picked up her beer again. “So when he said those things, when I confronted him, I couldn’t help it. I still wanted to believe it. I mean, they’d gotten what they’d come for, what reason would he have to keep lying?”

She took a long swig from the can. “But the longer I sat with it, the more wrong it got. Even if he *did* come to care for me, I couldn’t ever fully trust him again. And you can’t build a family if you haven’t got trust. Besides,” she lifted her eyes to them at last. “Why would I want to build a family like that, when I’ve already got a great one right here. I’m just sorry it took me so long to figure it out.”

Tom opened his mouth, closed it again, and shook his head with a smile. “You know, I always did like you.”

“Took me a minute to get there, Thomas.” She held up the beer can, and he clinked his against it. “Glad I did.”

From upstairs, there was a *thunk* followed by more hushed giggling, then someone barely whispered *"you're supposed to hit her with the pillow, not me!"*

"Great. They've got Tails up now, too." Tom snorted. "He's going to be a *joy* tomorrow."

"We might need to mandate a nap time."

"Not a bad idea," Rachel sighed. "Jojo's a *ray of sunshine* when she's tired. And her and Sonic together-"

"Yeah," Tom snorted, "Definitely a mandated nap time."

They went quiet a moment, listening to the little hurried footsteps moving back and forth across the attic. Tom was about to stand up and put an end to it when there was another creak from around the corner, and all eyes turned to a guilty Knuckles who had been attempting to sneak up the stairs, pillow in hand.

"Aw, hey hon." Maddie put down her beer. "Sorry. Were we too loud?"

"Were *they* too loud?" Tom pointed above just as another violent *thunk* and following *ow!* rang from above.

"Uh. No." He looked at Rachel and then quickly looked away, hiding the pillow unsuccessfully behind his back. "I. Uh. Thought perhaps it might be my duty- as eldest brother, I mean, to go and, er, remind my wayward siblings that it was bedtime."

"Oh, I can do that, sweetheart," Maddie said. When Knuckles didn't move, her lip quirked. "Does this reminder come with maybe a chance to *join* the battle?"

"It… might."

She nodded. "As long as you don't hit Tails too hard."

Knuckles blinked, eyes quickly moving up to the ceiling just as Sonic could be heard boasting *no one beats Blue Justice!* "Tails was not my intended target."

"Ah. Understood." She gave her eldest a salute. "Fight with honor, soldier."

"Yes, Mother!" He scampered up the steps, Maddie watching after him with sad eyes.

"It's good to see him happy."

"Yeah," Tom nodded, winding an arm about his wife's shoulders. "Hoping it keeps up for a few more months. Getting a little nervous though."

"What you were saying before…" Rachel flicked the tab of her beer. "You said that my- that Randell was somehow getting in the way?"

Tom hummed, blowing out hard through his nose. "With Knuckles." At Rachel's confused look, he added, "he wasn't at the wedding to get tasered."

“Oh *God* . Are you-” Rachel put down her beer long enough to press the heels of her hands against her eyes. “I forgot about that.”

“Yeah, well. We didn’t. My kid’s still got the scars to prove it.”

“Oh *fuck*!”

“Yeah.”

“How is he?!”

He shrugged half heartedly, Rachel finally prying her hands away from her eyes to track him. “He’s fine, as far as I can tell. Maddie looked him over after it happened.”

“Like Tom said. He’s got a few scars. Mostly on the backs of his arms and legs.” Maddie did her best to not let the anguish show, especially as her sister was watching them with such absolute, abject horror. “Sonic essentially collects those, though, Rach.”

“But *not like that*.”

Maddie swallowed. “No,” she said. “Definitely not like that.”

“Oh God, Mads.”

“He’s really okay, Rach. You can ask him yourself.”

“That doesn’t feel like enough.” She rubbed at her chest. “But hold on, what’s that got to do with Knuckles? I’d think him skipping out on the tasers and the cages would be a good thing.”

Tom took a sip of his own beer. “It’s not that he wasn’t *there* … but more about where he *was* when it was happening.”

“Which was…?”

“With Robotnik,” Maddie said quietly.

“Kidnapped?”

Maddie shook her head. “Working with him.”

“He was manipulated,” Tom said hurriedly, sitting up straighter at the look of shock and confusion on Rachel’s face. “And when he realized he’d picked the wrong side, he switched teams, but-”

“G.U.N.’s gonna hold that against him,” Rachel finished.

“Big time,” Tom said.

“He’s a *child*.”

“He’s an ‘enemy combatant’,” Maddie spat, making air quotes with her free hand. Above their heads, they heard more hushed laughter, and the sounds of two teenagers aggressively whispering about the rules of pillow fights. The empty beer can crunched slightly in Tom’s fist.

“Oh for God’s sake.”

“S’what we said.” Tom put the dented can down. “We’ve got grounds to sue them over the whole tasers-and-cages thing, but that only covers Sonic and Tails. So, we’re kind of at their mercy, unfortunately.”

“It’s gonna kill him, if that application gets rejected,” Maddie’s voice shook. Tom rubbed her back. “No matter *what* we say. No matter what *he* says. It’s gonna stick in him like a burr and we’ll never shake it loose.”

“I had no idea.”

“How could you know, Rach.” Maddie looked away a moment, trying to compose herself again, dragging in a shivering breath. “The worst part is that there’s nothing we can do to show them what he’s like. I mean, we could send his new school records or family pictures. It wouldn’t matter. Most of the reason behind all this stupid red tape is that they’re angry they can’t touch our other two.”

“That’s the scariest part of all this,” added Tom. “If G.U.N. decides to swoop in, he’s not legally *ours* . And we don’t want to scare him with any of those ideas. He’s just a kid. But he’s *our* kid. And I want him as safe and *ours* as the other two.”

Rachel shook her head. “Well,” she said, slowly, “then I guess we’ve got time to make sure he knows he’s family.”

Beside his wife, Tom grinned. “Yeah. I think that’s-”

Above their heads, there was a massive *THUNK* followed by a barely suppressed, injured screech that sounded suspiciously like Tails.

The tension around them dissolved, the adults groaning as the sounds of choked, ugly sobs were being bravely swallowed above them, sounding all too much like a weathered eight year old veteran.

“Well,” Maddie said, putting down her beer. “It was fun while it lasted.”

Tom snorted. “You want me to break up the war?”

“Nah. Sounds like Doctor Maddie might be needed in the barracks.”

She moved to stand, but then the attic stairs creaked open and the crying was no longer muffled. All three adults watched as Knuckles appeared in the doorway, Tails on his hip as if he weighed nothing at all. “We… have had a casualty, Mother.”

“I can see that,” Maddie said, waving him over. “What happened, hmm? Where’s it hurt?”

The fox kit raised his head, drawing a shaky breath. “M-my arm-”

“I believe he landed on it when he was knocked from the air by-”

“I’msorryI’msorryI’msorryItwasanaccidentIdidn’tmeantoknockhimdownMom!” Sonic was in the doorway now, wringing his hands, panic-stricken.

“Easy, bud,” Tom put a hand up. “Breathe.”

Sonic’s attempt at breathing sounded more like hiccups.

Maddie examined Tails’ arm, rotating it and bending it gently. “Nothing broken,” she declared. “Think you just landed on your funny bone.”

Tails blinked, and his crying slowed. “My what?”

Tom raised his own arm and tapped the underside of his elbow.

Knuckles frowned. “That is an ill-named body part. Tails’ injury has been humorous to no one.”

“It’s actually attached to the humerus.”

“It is attached to a joke?”

“No, it’s- Nevermind.” Maddie reached down and hefted Tails into her arms.

Rachel leaned over the side of her chair. “Thank goodness your big brother was there to help you!”

Tails hid his face against Maddie’s shoulder. “Mmhm.”

Sonic apparently took that as a personal offense, clinging to his Father’s leg. “*Ireallydidn’tmeanto!”*

“I know, bud.”

“*I’msosorry!”*

“I think there’s someone else you should be saying that too.”

“*I’msosorryTailsIdidn’tmeantodestroyyoursenseofhumor.* ”

“Close enough, bud.”

“Alright.” Maddie pressed a few extra kisses to the side of Tails’ head. “I’m thinking it’s bedtime. *Actual* bedtime. Tom, you wanna help me settle these guys in.”

“I think that’s a great idea.” Rachel stood. “I’m starting to fade.”

“Alright. Bedtime for *everyone* .” Tom reached down and took a still vibrating Sonic’s hand, giving it a gentle tug.

There were more goodnights said as they climbed the stairs. Rachel stood at the doorway of the guestroom, watching the two parents bring their two younger kids back upstairs. She heard the murmurs of more goodnights, more children’s voices. Of two parents exchanging *I Love You’s* and turning lights off.

“Thank you.”

She started.

Knuckles was standing at the bottom of the stairs, one hand on the basement door. “For the- the gift. It was unexpected, and in my surprise I forgot to express my gratitude this afternoon.”

She opened her mouth, started to say that it was fine, don’t worry about it. Instead, she told him, “It was my pleasure.”

The barest hint of a smile graced his muzzle and moved to retreat, then paused. “Everyone was so anxious over your visit, but it seems there was no need. I am glad of that.”

“Me too.”

Knuckles nodded once. “A tribe is stronger when its members are not fractured. Whatever quarrel there was between you and Mother… I am glad to see it resolved.”

She leaned on the doorjam, a hand at her chest. “You and me both, kiddo. I’ll see you for breakfast, alright?”

“Indeed.” His tiny smile broadened. “Good night, Aunt Rachel.”

Tom and Maddie came down just as Knuckles vanished to the basement. Tom closed the attic steps behind them.

“Have we reached a ceasefire?”

Tom twisted around with a laugh. “Yeah, I think we’re good for tonight. All the bruises have been kissed, and Sonic’s been assured that he’s not losing any video games for sufficiently KO’ing his brother.”

Rachel glanced down towards the first floor before looking towards the parents again. “You’ve been doing a great job with them.”

Maddie blinked, Tom’s brow furrowing. “Rach?”

“I just- you’ve been doing a great job with them.”

“Thanks…”

She glanced back down towards the first floor, where her eldest nephew had gone. “Yeah. It’s just- I’m glad they’ve got you. I really, really am.”

At the end of a long day, Rachel settled into the guest bed. In the thin slices of moonlight, she could see family photos propped on the dresser; of baseball games, barbecues, science fairs. Just above her head, two of those children were whispering with her daughter about all of the things they’d do together in the morning. Below, a young boy deemed a war criminal was laying out his yoga mat or curling up beneath a duvet, listening for any noises in case a big brother was needed again.

She breathed in deep, nestling into the pillows.

They were just kids.

Strange, superpowered, *normal* kids who were part of a family.

Part of *her* family.

In the past two years, she’d watched that family as an outsider, as her sister and brother-in-law found, adopted, and protected their first child, and then their next two, all the time fighting to make sure they got to be children. Their children. In *their* family.

They continued to fight, even now.

For their children.

For *their* family.

For *her* family.

Listening to the whispers and soft laughter above her head, knowing the boy in the basement was doing the same, she wondered if maybe it was time she fought for her family, too.

Rachel and Jojo were well aware that they only had a few days in Green Hills before their flight back to San Francisco, and they embraced the time wholeheartedly. Maddie’s comments about how it was *bizarrely normal around here most days* finally kicked in full throttle when Rachel arrived downstairs to find Maddie and Tom in the kitchen, radio playing some local station, and a host of exhausted kids passed out in a pile on the couch, cartoons playing on the TV.

“Enjoy this while you can,” Maddie whispered, handing Rachel a mug of coffee. “They’ll be up and ready to go in an hour or two.”

The grownups sat on the porch enjoying the sunshine, listening to the tinny sound of the radio through the french doors. Eventually, Tails made his way out, but only so he could sun himself on Maddie’s lap, falling asleep almost as soon as his head was against her shoulder.

“Enjoy *that* while it lasts,” Rachel mused, kicking up her feet onto the little patio table, mirroring Tom. “Jojo’s getting *too cool* for hugs.”

That sentiment was nearly squashed by the appearance of a very tired looking Knuckles dragging his feet up from the basement. He shuffled onto the porch with a grunt and went to Maddie's side, stopping when he saw Tails on her lap. Without a word, he reached over and snatched the fox away (a snoring Tails dangling from his hands) and dumped his little brother onto his father's lap before moving to Maddie's, happily dozing off.

"Gee, thanks," said Tom, readjusting Tails so he wouldn't wake up with a sore arm.

Knuckles snored.

"Nevermind," said Rachel. "I guess there are a few exceptions."

The other two arrived just a few minutes later, looking a great deal more awake than the *Exceptions* and went to go play catch after trying and failing to squirm away from good morning hugs and kisses.

Tom watched them over his '#1 Dad' mug. "I think Sonic's *extra* -too-cool with Jojo here."

"Oh totally," Maddie agreed, running her fingers rhythmically through the echidna's quills as he slept. "Thankfully these two are always happy to soak up the extra love."

Tom hummed, leaning over towards Rachel to whisper, "don't tell Sonic I told you, but when we *don't* have company, you couldn't pry him off us. Sometimes, he even likes to crawl into our bed in the morning. It's the sweetest thing-"

"DAD!" Sonic nearly got throttled by a fly ball, turning on his heel to glare up at Tom, ducking away just in time. "SERIOUSLY!?"

Rachel laughed, shaking her head, wondering what in the world had made her hate Tom in the first place.

Spring break continued onward.

Rachel and Jojo took part in everything Green Hills had to offer. They hiked in the morning, guided by an overenthusiastic Sonic pretending to know all the names of trees ("This here is a Blue Oak, named after the town's most lovable mascot." - "That's a pine tree." - "Dad! You're ruining the tour!"). They went to the diner and ate hamburgers, and waved hello to a Not-So-Crazy-Carl as he came out of the local antique shop.

Jojo and Sonic were practically attached at the hip, going everywhere together, mourning the fact that their time was coming to a fast end until Rachel reminded them that Summer break was just around the corner.

"*OhmygodMomDadcanwe*?" Tom had to tether Sonic with a hand to the top of the head before the boy cracked the sidewalk from jumping.

"Mom and I'll talk about it. But I think a Summer Family trip sounds like a great idea."

“Agreed.” Rachel wound her arm through Maddie’s. “We can’t go that long before seeing one another again.”

Maddie suspected that the hope of a future get together was all that kept Sonic from breaking down when Jojo and Rachel were loading up the car. He and his cousin hugged one another until their parents had to come and tug them apart, rolling their eyes at the dramatic scene they made.

“How will I live when you’re not here!”

“I’ll never have fun *ever again*, Mom!”

“You should see him when we run out of pizza,” Tom muttered, before finally managing to unclasp Sonic and Jojo’s steel-gripped fingers.

But eventually the car was packed, and goodbyes were exchanged. Knuckles and Tails gave Rachel hugs right before Maddie and Tom went in for theirs.

“It’s so cool getting to have an Aunt!” Tails let her know, huge eyes looking up at her as Knuckles carefully wound his arms around her waist before letting go and stepping away.

“Indeed,” he said, gruffly. “It is good to know that the Tribe is growing.”

They were cutting it closer than Rachel wanted to catch their flight. With some insistence, Jojo headed towards the car while Rachel stood only a little awkwardly looking at the little family.

Her little family.

“Well,” she said, gaze drifting across each of them, finally landing on Sonic. “I think this is the best goodbye we’ve had since I’ve known you.”

He grinned. “And you’re not tied to a chair this time!”

“Or being used in some crazy government hit-job,” Tails added from the porch.

“A marked improvement, I’d say,” Knuckles agreed.

It was almost easy to laugh about it now, and she let herself do so, bending down towards the hedgehog. “How ‘bout this? Instead of goodbye, we just say ‘until next time’?”

In a rush of wind, he closed the gap between them, hugging her briefly, but tightly, around the middle. “Until next time, Aunt Rachel.”

She didn’t try to hide the way her eyes misted.

As they pulled away, Jojo already furiously texting summer vacation destination ideas to her cousins who apparently already had a group chat, Rachel reflected on how genuinely excited she was to see them all again. Summer couldn’t come soon enough.

Weekend Project

Chapter Summary

> In which the two bigger brothers recruit Dad (and Wade) to help with a project for their little brother.

The last weekend of their Spring Break was consumed by an idea Sonic had after he raced up to his room to grab another comic book and found Tails struggling over small modifications to his backpack on the lower bunk. “What’chya doin’?”

“Trying to fix some of the triggers,” Tails mumbled back, half paying attention while he wrangled one of the wires out with a pair of tweezers. The bedsheets were covered in little bits and bobs that Sonic couldn’t really distinguish between. But as he watched Tails squint at the bedspread (a collection of stars and moons and planets), he realized that Tails couldn’t much see them, either.

“Wish there was something we could do for him,” Sonic bemoaned to his mother from where he was lying upside down on the couch.

She dipped her head to look at him, holding a pair of Tails’ socks in hand, folding them into a neat ball. “I’ll talk to Dad, but maybe he just needs a big-brother’s creativity to solve this.”

“Knuckles isn’t really a *creative* type, Mom.”

“You do realize he’s got *two* big brothers. Right?”

“He’s got two… Oh!”

“There it is.”

“I forgot about that!”

“Mmmhm.” She leaned back against the couch, reaching for one of her workout shirts. “I knew that creative brain would kick into gear at some point.”

Swiveling back the right way, he sat cross legged beside her. “It might be good for Knuckles, too,” he mused. “Maybe it’ll just, I dunno, make him feel more big brotherly or whatever.”

“Or whatever is right. But before you go and talk to him about it-” and she passed him a pile of folded laundry to put away with a stern reminder that it did *not* just get shoved into the bottom of his drawer.

He brought the idea up to Knuckles, who was absolutely enthusiastic, before going to Tom.

“Hey, Dad?” It was a Saturday, Maddie had taken Tails to the clinic to play with a new litter of kittens, and Tom was spending his morning trying to clean charred bits of corn and steak off the grill.

“S’up, bud?”

“So… I wanted to ask you something.”

“Mmmmhm.”

“But just know, that once I do ask this I’m never going to ask it again ever in my entire life.”

“If you’re looking for a raise in allowance, you’ll have to wait until next year.”

“*Debatable.* But no.” He took a deep breath, looking his father square in the eye. “Could you help me and Knuckles build something.”

If he thought his superspeed was fast, it was nothing compared to the way a thrilled Tom practically threw them both into the car, speeding them off to the hardware store, belting Queen's Greatest Hits out the open windows.

He called Maddie while Knuckles and Sonic went to find a cart, and she was just as enthusiastic about the idea. “He’s having a great time here,” she said. “The rescue litter is keeping him completely occupied.”

“It might take us more than one day, babe. Do you think-”

“Don’t even sweat it. One of our rescue dogs here just had puppies a few weeks ago and I haven’t told Tails yet. He’ll be over the moon if I bring him back tomorrow.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Mads..”

“You can thank me by ordering from that gyro place tonight. And don’t you dare skimp on the hummus!”

Tom spent way too much time in the building materials aisle, giddily explaining the difference between pine and redwood, double checking measurements, and having the boys pick out their favorite colors of paint. They stocked up on an advanced tool kit and jars of nuts and bolts and screws and wires. Eventually, Sonic and Knuckles had to practically drag their Dad to checkout before he set up a permanent home beside the 25% off pressure washers he’d been ogling.

“Being a Earth Adult seems very odd,” Knuckles whispered to Sonic on line as Tom tortured the poor cashier with various handyman puns. “He does not get this excited over video games or comic books. But I believe he may have fallen in love with a dish rack in aisle four.”

“Yeah, you should have seen him when they had a sale on steaks at the farmers market last summer. I think he actually cried.”

When they got home, they *all* almost cried when they realized that before they could actually build *anything* they were going to have to complete a task that Tom had been putting off for over a decade: clean out the garage.

They broke for lunch instead.

Over ham and cheese sandwiches, they strategized. And called Wade. They'd need a pickup to load up the scrap for the junkyard (the minivan just wasn't built for hauling). They also pulled up the Green Hills Freecycle page and put a notice out so folks could come and give old things new homes.

Then they brought out the boom box and a stack of Tom's favorite CDs, and got to work. Stuff for the junkyard went in one pile by the driveway. Stuff that the folks in town might want got spread out in the front yard. Stuff they wanted to keep stayed in the backyard. Sonic had fun zipping through the stacks of milk crates, presenting things to Tom and asking "Does this spark joy?" over and over.

A third place bowling trophy did not spark joy.

A poster of Cindy Crawford *did* , though after a scandalized look from Knuckles (*First the country club woman and now this??*) and too many failed attempts at explaining that no, Tom did not personally know Cindy Crawford, and *no* , he wasn't planning on marrying her anytime soon, and *no* Knuckles absolutely was not allowed to call his father a *heartless lady of the night* , Tom agreed it could go to a new home.

A bin full of vintage '77 Kenner Star Wars figures sparked so much joy that their cleaning got derailed for a full half-hour of marveling and dusting off and playing, trying to imitate the C3P0 and Chewbacca, before Tom had Sonic go put them in the house.

Something that absolutely did not spark any joy was a small collection of trash; empty soup cans, protein bar wrappers, and long since forgotten jars of peanut butter half finished, the lid fused on with age. "The hell?" Tom stepped around a broken bottle that looked like it had once held some sort of drink.

Sonic zipped over, and Tom quickly shot out a hand. "Watch out, bud. There's broken glass." He called over some of the piles of boxes to Knuckles for a broom and reached down to pick up one of the soup tins.

When he looked back up, Sonic was frozen in place, holding his breath, looking a little unsteady on his feet.

"Bud?" When there was no answer, Tom carefully made his way around the shards of glass to kneel on the concrete floor. "Sonic? You okay?"

Sonic swallowed, looking down at the soup tin in Tom's hands. He tried for a smile, but looked close to tears. "Oops," he croaked. "Looks like I forgot to clean up."

Tom's brow furrowed, and he turned around to look at the pile of trash again. It was hard to see at first, but the picture got easier to see the longer he spent putting pieces together. Empty

food containers. The scuffs in the dust that had filled again. A forgotten blanket, balled up by the back. A water bottle Tom had left on the porch three summers ago that had gone missing, now empty and on its side.

“Oh,” said Tom. “Oh, bud.”

“One hard thing a day, right?” Sonic laughed, but it was watery and thick. He wound his arms around himself. “Sorry about- about stealin’ stuff. It was mostly in your trash, but — it was a bad winter, and I was hungry.” He looked away, face hot. Tom saw his throat bob.

“Sonic…”

The tenor of his voice had his son flinching defiantly back, and he glared at his Dad halfheartedly. “I told you,” he said, trying and failing to be angry. “I *keep* telling you. It’ll make you sad.”

“It does.”

“I don’t want *pity*.”

“Then you aren’t hearing me, if that’s what you think this is.” Tom drew Sonic close, and the hedgehog let him, even if he stayed stiff as a board in Tom’s arms. “We’re just sad that we weren’t there to help you earlier.”

Sonic’s shoulders began to soften. “I mean… you kinda were…”

“More than just a garage and some food.”

“Oh.”

“But I’m still glad you told me.”

“You are?”

“I am.” He pulled back just enough to press a firm kiss to Sonic’s head. “Makes me glad you’re with us now. *Really* with us. Bed and dinners and sports and video games and hugs and all.”

“I *do* love all those things.” His voice was wet and warbly, drifting between forced nonchalance and broken.

“And we love you.”

Sonic hid his face against Tom’s shoulder to keep the way his face flushed to himself. Knuckles chose that moment to appear, having apparently heard most of what was said between Tom and his middle child.

“It is a good thing that he had this shelter, even if he was alone, Father.”

Tom ran his hands up and down Sonic’s quivering back. “Hmm?”

Standing in the open garage doorway, broom in both hands, Knuckles nodded gravely. “Our planet did not have winters, as Earth does, but I spent many a dry season unsure of each meal. Hunting feels dishonorable when the prey is near-starving as well.” He twisted the wooden handle. “I-I do not mean to minimize your experience, Brother-”

“I know,” Sonic sniffed.

“-only to tell you I understand what-”

“I know,” Sonic said again. From his place in Tom’s arms, he waved his big brother over, and Knuckles dropped the broom in order to hurry into the embrace.

The man had to shift out of his crouch, so he was sitting on the dirty garage floor, but all he said was, “I’m so glad you boys have each other, you know that?”

They sat curled together on that dusty concrete floor until they heard Wade’s truck on the gravel.

Tom let Knuckles and Sonic have a minute while he went out to get Wade, and by the time the deputy had stepped into their garage, both boys looked as if nothing traumatic had been dug up from the back of a garage, and instead were sweeping away broken glass along with a long string of winters.

He’d brought a barrage of tools his own father had given him in the so-far-dashed hopes that his son would one day become a bonafide handyman. Unfortunately, Wade had only ever used his hammer to crack open a jar of pickles, and that hadn’t ended well at all, and so he brandished his somewhat vinagerry toolkit for Tom to take.

He’d also brought donuts.

There was a steady stream of people who’d seen their posting and came to collect the different items that they’d laid out on tarps and blankets down the driveway. A few of them brought cash that Tom refused. A few others brought trades of cookies and homemade biscuits. Those Tom and Knuckles and Sonic gladly took.

While Knuckles and Tom shouldered their way through more of the heavier things, Sonic acted as a bonafide carnival barker, showing off their various wares with dramatic sweeps of his arms. He’d have twirled a handlebar mustache, if he had one.

“I think he missed his calling,” Wade said to Tom, helping to move an unused kayak to the back of the garage (Tom swearing up and down that *some day* he’d use it and therefore it was worth keeping around). “Kid would have absolutely killed it as a salesman.”

Tom looked over to where Sonic was showing a young couple a set of creepy porcelain figurines that Maddie had inherited from her grandmother and absolutely could not stand, telling them that they were worth somewhere between one and one million dollars.

“I think snake oil salesman is more apt,” said Tom. “God forbid he ever sees QVC.”

“Oh, Sonic would be the *king* of QVC.”

“You say that like he could actually do it.”

“You don’t think so?”

“You kidding me? *Hell* yeah he could do it. My kid would *dominate* QVC. But you’re missing the point-”

From the driveway, the young couple gladly took home the awful porcelain babies while Knuckles paraded about with Cindy Crawford's poster. Tom had to quickly drop his side of the kayak and rush out when his eldest began loudly declaring that, “my father, *the wretched dallier* , needs his mistress removed from the gay-rage so that he may learn to appreciate the Goddess that married him!”

Wade ended up taking the poster and throwing it into his car while Sonic lay face down, cackling senseless into the grass, and Tom pinched the bridge of his nose as Knuckles took on a very Maddie Wachowski tone to tell his father *I am not angry, I am just disappointed.*

In his defense, Tom *did* try and call Maddie to get her to explain the situation, but had to hang up after she wouldn’t stop laughing.

They cleared out the garage by the time Maddie and Tails were back. The eight year old had a slew of stories about the baby kittens he’d gotten to help with. His favorite one had apparently been a tiny, black and white he elected to be named Batman.

“Linda told me that they all need to be named with a theme if they’re rescued,” Tails said between massive bites of his gyro. Tzatziki dropped to the floor of the deck. “The last litter was named after breakfast food, right mom?”

“That’s right.” She reached over and wiped sauce off his cheek. He barely noticed. “Sonic loved a little kitten named Bacon.”

“Didn’t he sneak Bacon home in his backpack?” asked Tom.

“Got all the way to our neighborhood before he blew our cover by meowing,” Sonic said mournfully.

“Think our house is plenty full as it is,” Tom said.

“Plus, Dad’s allergic,” Maddie added.

“Not allergic. Cats just… don’t like me.”

“Yes, dear, they make your eyes water out of spite.”

“So what made you guys decide to have a not-yard-sale?” Tails asked.

The three eldest Wachowski men exchanged glances.

“Just something to kill some time,” Tom said.

“It’s been on his list for ages,” Sonic added.

Tails seemed to accept that answer. “Did you find any treasures?”

Tom opened his mouth, but Knuckles beat him to it. “I’m afraid I found something *quite* disturbing.”

“Bud-”

The echidna raised a hand to silence him, and then reached out to touch Maddie’s forearm. “I regret that I must deliver some sobering news, Mother.”

Maddie bit her bottom lip and tried to look solemn.

“It has come to my attention that Father has *not* been as faithful to you as I believe he ought.”

“*No*.”

“Yes. I discovered a shrine-”

“It was *one* poster!”

“Father, please! Your protests only confirm your guilt.”

Maddie let a snickering laugh slip out and both of them turned back to her.

“Mother?”

“Oh, baby, you are my champion, you know that?” she said through giggled, cupping his cheek. “But I’ve gotta tell you something. I *knew* about the poster.”

Knuckles paled. “You what?”

“It was up on Dad’s dorm wall back in college. Right next to one of a Mustang convertible and Freddie Mercury.” She tapped his nose. “And I’ve gotta tell you something else. I had posters too.”

Tom chimed in, “Duran Duran, right?”

“Mmmhm. And I had Tom Cruise up there too before he went completely nuts.”

“Good choices.”

“Right?”

Knuckles looked between the both of them. “You… *both* participated in this- this *idolatry?* ”

“Told you she wouldn’t be mad,” Tom said.

“I need a moment,” Knuckled said, staring at his empty plate.

Maddie rubbed his back. “Hoo boy, your first crush is gonna be a doozy, I can tell.”

“I crush many things, Mother.”

“Figure of speech,” she said gently. “Means when you like someone. Like Dad and I do.”

“Ew,” Sonic said behind his gyro.

“I’m never gonna like *anyone*,” said Tails. “I’m gonna stay with mom and dad forever.”

“I really hope you mean that,” said Maddie.

Tails’ tails flickered happily. He glanced at his brothers then to ask, “Can I help clean tomorrow?”

Sonic and Knuckles looked ready to panic, but Maddie effortlessly swooped in. “Actually, sweetheart, I need help tomorrow at the clinic again. I already told your Father, but there’s a litter of puppies-”

That was all Tails needed to hear.

Tails and Maddie were out the door early the next morning. Tom went out to get bagels and coffee and hot chocolate from the local deli, and the three of them went to work.

The rest of the junk was easy enough to go through. A few people came through to collect (though they kept a few things - namely a stack of comic books and Maddie’s old skateboard that Sonic was completely enamored with) and by noon, they’d completely cleaned out the garage.

“I’ve never seen it so *empty*.” Tom gazed at the open space, amazed.

Sonic looked around. “Neither have I!”

Tom was going to point out that he’d only been there for one year, but quickly swallowed the thought down, remembering the pile of wrappers and cans.

He nearly brought that up, but kept it to himself. Hard questions could wait.

Wade got there just after noon. He was hailed as a hero for bringing pizza.

They chose a space that was best on the wall and laid out their tools and materials.

“Alright, boys,” Tom said, hands on his hips. “Now comes the fun part. Anyone got an idea of what we want this DIY Evil Lab to look like?”

Sonic waxed on dramatically about string lights and cobwebs and maybe a firework or two, but finally settled on a layout of long tables with plenty of drawers and cork board

organization for tools.

Knuckles couldn't quite learn how to properly hold a hammer without shattering any materials (or the Earth, Sonic speculated), and eventually ended up just pushing them into the wood with his thumb (as if they were pushpins in corkboard). Sonic *wanted* to speed through it all, but half of the things he made fell apart and he was forced to go normal, human speed with only some complaints.

Towards the end, when Wade and Tom were using the sharper tools, Knuckles and Sonic were given the job of painting a sign to go above the workspace.

"We've gotta come up with a cool name for the space," Sonic explained, popping caps off the acrylic paints Maddie had gotten him for last Christmas.

"Ah. Yes." Knuckles tapped his chin. "What about… The Lab of Tails' Science Equipment."

"That's *literally what it is.* "

"Exactly."

"That's not *cool!"*

"What about Father's Former Harem?"

"We're not calling it that!" Tom shouted from the garage.

"*You* choose something then, if my suggestions are so inadequate."

"How about the Lab of Absolute Prower?"

"That's a good one, bud!" Tom grunted between hefting up a wooden plank. "Nice pun!"

"Thanks, Dad!"

"I do not understand." Knuckles glared at the plywood they'd be painting. "What does that mean? Is Tails absolute? Nothing is absolute except for the emerald. And perhaps myself."

"Just pick out colors, big guy."

Knuckles grumbled, but ended up setting aside purple and green while Sonic began carefully sketching out the words.

Despite the workload, they finished an hour before Maddie drove the car slowly back onto the driveway. The garage had been closed, and so Tails didn't see much of anything when he hopped out of the car.

Sonic and Knuckles had already washed the paint off their quills and hands, and asked all the right questions about puppies as they hurried into the house.

Maddie met Tom halfway, Wade already having said his goodbyes. “So. How'd it go?”

“*Great*.”

“Good.” She looped her arm in his, the two of them slowly moving towards the house. “This was really sweet of them, trying to surprise their little brother.”

“I know.” He kissed her cheek. “They’ve got a whole plan, too. They told me I wasn’t allowed to say *anything*. They want to handle the surprise.”

She sighed, chest expanding and deflating slowly. “We’re raising some really great boys.”

Sonic took that moment to open the front door. “Come *on* ! You two are so slow! We need to start making dinner!”

“We’re coming!”

“*Faster*, Donut Lord. Hup two!”

Maddie laughed. “Hey! No hello?”

Sonic rolled his eyes, but zipped down the steps to give her a tight hug around the waist. “Hi! Love you! Now *come on!”*

It was all part of the plan. They got through dinner quick enough, and then Sonic (somewhat subtly) announced that they were all going to help him practice for his game next Thursday night. This was followed by a not-so-subtle hunt for gear around the house, during which Sonic lamented that he couldn’t find his glove, to which Tom responded on-cue with a thought that they might have left it out in the garage and wouldn’t Tails be a help and go see if he could find it?

Which led to the other four following him out onto the back deck and down to the driveway, the parents failing to hide smiles while the older brothers elbowed and whispered to each other. Sonic let out a squeak when Tails hit the button to open the garage door and Knuckles clamped a hand over his brother’s mouth with lightning speed.

They’d left the overhead lights on *and* added the fairy lights Sonic had suggested. They’d moved everything from its cluttered corner in the attic bedroom to the drawers and pegboard, all neatly labeled. They’d put casters on the legs of an old wooden barstool. The carefully painted sign hung just slightly askew above everything.

As Tails’ jaw dropped, Sonic slipped out of Knuckles’ grasp to go zipping down into the garage, practically vibrating with excitement. “Ta-DA! Now you don’t hafta work upstairs in the dark on your bed! I came up with the name! You love it, right? You know you love it!”

Twin Tails spinning, Tails hovered up to take a closer look, shock melting away into joy. “Ha! ‘Ultimate Prower’. That’s good!”

Sonic hopped onto the barstool as Knuckles and their parents stood in the doorway. “We put stuff where we thought they should go, but look, the labels come out of these little holders, so you can rearrange if you need to. Also we didn’t know all the names, so some of ‘em are blank. Sorry ‘bout that, but google failed us. I think some of this stuff must be a Miles Prower Original, right?”

The little fox was scanning the pegboard, grinning. “Yeah. You guys did all this in the time Mom and I were at the clinic?”

“Yup!” Sonic swiveled the stool around. “You like it, right? I mean, it’s better than upstairs? Not that I don’t want you upstairs! I just- *we* just thought it’d be easier for you to-”

“I love it!” Tails fluttered down to sit on the workbench, hand on his knees. “I can’t believe you did all this! I’ve never had a space that was just *mine* before.”

Knuckles crossed his arms. “Technically you still have to share the space with the transport. And Father’s collection of wishful-thinking outdoor equipment.”

“Hey, I *am* gonna use that kayak some day,” Tom said.

Tails giggled. “I don’t mind.”

Sonic traced the grain on the wood with a finger. “So… you *do* like it?”

“I really do.” The little fox leaned forward to hug the hedgehog around the neck. “Thank you!”

Sonic leaned as well and the stool rolled out from under him. Thankfully Tails was quick in hovering down off the bench and landing them both safely on their feet, laughing and clinging to each other.

Knuckles moved forward then, not to be left out, and caught them both up in a bone-crushing hug.

From the doorway, Tom slung an arm over Maddie’s shoulder. “I think we’re doing alright, with this parenting thing, don’t you?”

“I’d say so,” she hummed, slipping a hand into his back pocket. “So what’d you do with Cindy?”

“Wade took her.”

“Ahh, keeping her close by.”

He chuckled. “Permission to go visit once in a while?”

She pinched his backside through the denim. “Granted. Just don’t tell Knuckles.”

They didn’t actually play any baseball that evening. Instead, they helped Tails arrange his tools to his liking, listened to him explain the ones that google couldn’t identify, and schemed about what his first big project was going to be until it was way past bedtime.

Then, after Dad had turned out the lights and closed the attic door, Sonic and Tails stayed up another hour, planning the treehouse they were going to build once summer vacation hit.

And it.

Was.

Awesome.

Seeking Outside Help

Chapter Summary

> In which Tom and Maddie find the perfect person to start helping their kiddos process their trauma.

Maddie found the therapist by chance.

She and Tom had been looking casually on and off during the second adoption process, which was subsequently kicked into high gear when Sonic had taken off just a few weeks ago for two days.

And then they'd gotten the call from Judge Ramirez, letting them know that G.U.N would be vetting her through the adoption process, most likely doing their part to throw a wrench wherever they could into Tom and Maddie's lives by targeting their eldest.

Their eldest who put his own tribe to rest when he was little.

Which was enough to make both parents want to cry.

"And that's just one of the reasons our kid can barely string two feelings together."

"*One* of our kids," Maddie said, pressing the heels of her hands against her eyes. "We're not even counting what the other two went through. I mean, God, Tails is about to tug his ears off, and Sonic's near spinning down trying to keep Knuckles happy. I mean, I feel like our house is in the eye of a hurricane"

"Best place to be in a hurricane."

"Yeah, until *one thing* moves. I mean, God, Tom… what happens if-" she dragged in a deep breath, hands still on her eyes. She was starting to see stars. "I mean, *if* he doesn't-"

"We can't think about that, Mads."

"I want to think about it." She finally pulled her hands away, blinking away the spots. "Because it could happen, Tom. Because there's a *chance* that G.U.N. will figure out a way to keep things from happening for us. And *if* that happens… what then? How will they handle it? How will *we* handle them handling it?"

Tom let out a heavy breath. "I think that's above our pay grade."

She nodded. "I don't think we can handle this one on our own."

“We were talking about a therapist before…” Tom mentioned.

The next day they began to look.

The thing was that finding a therapist was as easy as finding a specific needle in a stack of needles. The ones Tom called all were booked for months, and the ones Maddie reached out to didn’t work with children.

And so it was by total chance that the name was dropped their way.

Judge Ramirez called Tom and Maddie as often as she could with updates. Her name on their phone screens had originally been exciting, but more and more they expected less and less.

“I haven’t heard anything yet,” Ramirez told them over speakerphone. The kids were outside in the back, squabbling over the rules of a small field hockey game.

“Yeah,” Tom had sighed, “we didn’t think you would.”

“Negativity never helped anyone, Thomas.”

Maddie rubbed at the lines forming on her brow. “We’re trying to stay positive. We really are. But it’s just been…”

“Really tough,” Tom finished for her. “I mean, God. Between waiting for this and trying to find any sort of therapist for the kids-”

“You’re trying to find them a therapist?”

Her surprise gave them pause. Tom looked over his shoulder to make sure the kids weren’t zipping towards the back door. They were still on the grass, arguing over an illegal pass. It looked like Knuckles was about to tackle Sonic. Tails had flown up and out of the way just in case, doing his best to delegate, tugging on his ears.

“Yeah,” he said, turning back around. “But everyone from here to Missoula is booked for months. And that’s if they work with kids at all.”

“We just want to get the jump on the… situation.” Maddie added. “And with how they were *before* they got to us-”

“I’m not questioning your choice. Wachowskis.” Ramirez’s voice was a balm, the two parents settling. “I think it’s a wonderful idea. And if you need a referral, I have options on hand that I’d highly recommend.”

Maddie and Tom could have fallen on the floor if the kitchen island wasn’t supporting them.

“You *have someone?”* Tom stared at the phone. “Holy *shit*!”

“I don’t appreciate the *language* , Mr. Wachowski. But yes. My office needs counselors on hand. Most of the children filed through us carry some sort of trauma. Molestation, abandonment, worse abuse than I can talk about here. If we didn’t have people helping, we

wouldn't have so many successful adoptions. If you're really serious about looking, I could have my office send you names."

The list showed up in their inbox just before dinner.

They told the kids soon after.

It wasn't hard to gather the three together. As quick as they were, and as wild as their lives could be, there were some constants that allowed Maddie and Tom the space for good talks.

Namely, Sunday mornings, when the three kids clambered either up the basement steps or down the attic ladder, shoving themselves as tightly between their parents, fighting for spots beside their mother or father.

"Do you remember how we talked to you about a doctor?" Maddie brought it up first, one arm around Knuckles who had squished himself into her right side, her other around Sonic who had shoved his head beneath her armpit, his quills poking into Tom's back.

"Hey, buddy," said Tom. "Maybe watch the sharp parts?"

"*All* of me is sharp," Sonic said back. "Sharp mind, sharp tongue, sharp eyes!"

"Okay, but maybe start with the quills."

Tails had taken to lying across Tom, ear on his chest. "Yeah," he said, tails flickering to the sound of his Dad's heartbeat. "Watch the quills!"

Maddie rolled her eyes. "*Like I was saying*. Do you remember us talking about a doctor?"

Sonic crooked his head up, quills poking Tom again. "Yeah…"

"It sounds familiar," Knuckles agreed. "You mentioned it when I told you of my childhood."

"Right. Well. It turns out, Judge Ramirez had some people on hand. And we thought it might be good to give you all a chance to look over the names before we start making calls."

Sonic blinked. "Oh."

Lifting up his head, Tails' brow furrowed. "So, like… we'd start *soon* ?"

"You would," said Maddie. "Soon as we can get an appointment."

"And we'd talk to them?"

"It's just like you talk to your school counselor now." Tom pushed Sonic's quills out of his face. "Just in a nicer, bigger office."

"We want to see how you feel about it."

Sonic glanced at his Mom between kicking Tom in the hip. “So, like… we’d get a choice?”

She leaned her chin on top of his head, pressing a kiss between his eyes. “You do.”

“And we could decide to go, or not, Mother?”

“Mmmmhm.” Maddie scratched Knuckles’ head. “But we think it would be a good idea.”

“A really good idea,” said Tom, poking Sonic in the back. Sonic elbowed him in the shoulder.

“And you don’t have to jump right in talking about *all* the hard things,” Maddie added.

“But isn’t that what it’s for?” Sonic asked.

“It *can* be,” she said, “But you can work up to it. Do what you’re comfortable with.”

Tails let his head come back to rest on Tom’s chest. “That doesn’t sound too bad.”

Sonic chewed his lip.

Knuckles, who had closed his eyes under Maddie’s calming touch, opened them to look at Sonic. “I would be… willing to try. If you will.”

“Me too,” Tails said.

Sonic plucked at a button on Maddie’s pajamas. “If we decide, like, *after* , that we don’t like it, can we still say no?”

“‘Course you can, bud.” Tom laid a hand on the boy’s middle. “This is supposed to be *for* you guys after all. If it’s stressing you out, then it’s not something you have to keep doing.”

The hedgehog looked between his parents, his brothers, and then nodded. “Okay. Yeah. Let’s see the names, I guess.”

“Sure.” Maddie stopped her echidna head scritches (much to said echidna’s chagrin), to open her nightstand drawer and pull out her phone. A few thumb swipes and she was holding out a pinned email for the boys to see. “Judge Ramirez vouches for all of them, but we’re leaning towards the one who’s closest to home - there in Spring Lake.”

Sonic blanched.

The Spring Lake address was a DR. A. BURDETTE.

The same Dr. A. Burdette whose office he used to break into to play pretend shrink with himself in the Before Times.

“Uh.”

“Now I know what you’re thinking,” Tom said.

Sonic's stomach did a backflip. "You do?"

"The doc's not gonna hold it against you that you creamed her home team a few weeks back."

"O-Oh. Right. Well, problem solved then."

"Dad and I are going to go talk to her first," Maddie said. "Before you guys do."

"Scope her out, all that jazz," Tom said. "But I really think this is gonna be *great* ."

"Yeah…" Sonic said, thinking of walls scaled, of mud left on a leather sofa, of notepads doodled in and glasses stretched over his face. "...Great."

Despite how *sure* Tom and Maddie were that this was a good idea, they somehow still felt like twenty-somethings on a job interview as they prepped for their scheduled first meeting with Dr. A. Burdette. Their harried, increasingly all-caps text messages the days leading up to their appointment ran the gamut of [WHAT COLOR TIE SHOULD I WEAR?] to [JUDGE TOLD THEM THE KIDS ARE ALIENS RIGHT??]. And in a late-night panic, they typed up a primer of sorts about each of their sons.

A primer they were both regretting having printed out and handed to the severely-normal looking woman across from whom they both sat.

It read as follows:

STUFF OUR KIDS HAVE BEEN THROUGH (THAT WE KNOW OF):

Sonic (blue hedgehog), 15

- Unknown birth parents
- First guardian killed in war (age 4)
- Sent across galaxy, told to hide by 1st guardian (age 4)
- Lived in woods outside Green Hills until age 14
- Nearly killed twiceby war criminal
- Became GOD for like 5 minutes

Knuckles (red echidna), 16

- Mother died before old enough to form memories (exact time unknown)
- Entire species wiped out in war (age 5)
    - War was with Sonic's first guardian
    - Apparently buried the whole tribe on his own (age 5)

- Traversed galaxy until age 15
- Recruited by war criminal (yes, same war criminal mentioned above) to hunt and kill Sonic
    - They're cool now though
    - Got it straightened out
- Probably more but that's all he's told us/we've witnessed

Miles (yellow fox), 8

- Unknown birth parents, who gave him up due to a genetic abnormality
    - Two tails
- Spent first 8 years of life bouncing between some sort of orphanage and various foster situation
    - None of those experiences sound positive
    - Lots of rejection
- Left home planet at 8 to come to Earth and warn Sonic about that war criminal
- Got hit with a missile and almost died (again, same war criminal)

Alice blinked, looking up from the sheet of paper. "You know, most parents don't come to me with cliffnotes of their children's trauma."

"We just thought-" Tom started.

"I mean, it's just *so* much," Maddie continued.

"We wanted you to know what you were getting yourself into," Tom kept going.

"And I know it sounds insane-" Maddie added.

The therapist made a little *hmph* noise in the back of her throat. "If it weren't for Judge Ramirez's phone call, I would've told you to take your science fiction and get out of my office," she told them. "But she had the photos of your first son's adoption to back up her story *and* yours. And, regardless of how *insane* it all might sound, I do want to tell you I think you're doing these children a service by coming here today."

Tom breathed out a heavy sigh of relief.

Maddie reached out to grab his hand. "We just… we want to help them."

"You don't need to tell *me.* I've gotten quite good at reading body language in this job, Mr. and Mrs. Wachowski." Dr. Burdette set the paper down on her desk, leaning back in her chair. "And I can spot the difference between parents who want me to *fix* their children… and parents who want me to *help* them."

"Do you-" Tom swallowed, squeezed Maddie's hand. "Do you think you *can?* "

“The children are open to this?”

“Yes,” Maddie said quickly. “We’ve been talking with them about it. Before we even found you. And they’ve been talking to their school counselors too.”

“I’d like to get in touch with those counselors, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, yes.”

“You’ll have to sign waivers for me to reach out-”

“Done,” Tom said. “Just show us where.”

Alice wheeled her chair to her filing cabinet, extracted a manilla folder with the necessary document. “These are quite standard, and will allow me to further familiarize myself with their individual situations.”

“Perfect.” Maddie leaned forward to pick up a pen.

“Did either of you have any questions for me, before we wrap this up?”

“Just one,” Tom said. “How soon can we start?”

She had an opening, early that Saturday morning. An introductory session, she called it. An hour total, fifteen minutes all together as a family, and then brief, fifteen-minute meetings with each child individually.

Which was how the five of them ended up in a waiting room on Saturday morning looking absolutely out of place among the beige walls and stacked magazines.

“I think this may be a bad idea.” Knuckles was sitting on Maddie’s right, gripping hold of her arm. She gently eased his fingers to loosen enough to keep her hands from falling asleep. “Perhaps we did not vet her enough. What if she works for the government? Or has a robot hidden behind the walls, ready to attack.” He looked up at the sprinkler, as if it might have been hiding some sort of superweapon.

“She’s not doing that, honey.”

“How do you *know* , Mother?”

“I’m pretty sure.”

“‘*Pretty sure’* is not a thorough assessment!”

“Best we’ve got, big guy,” said Tom, flipping aimlessly through a magazine about women’s health and dating advice. “Plus, if there *was* a robot, you’d just power bump it into pieces.”

“You *are* really good at punching,” Tails said. He’d opted to bring his own book, a sudoku collection he’d spotted at the grocery store.

The echidna grunted, and loosened his grip on Maddie's arm just slightly.

Sonic sat, gripping the edge of his seat with both hands, eyes darting around the space. If there were security cameras, they weren't in the waiting room. He couldn't remember if he'd ever thought to look for them in the doctor's office itself, which he was kicking himself for now. But then again, that'd be all kinds of unethical, right? Yeah, yeah, no. He was probably fine. He'd been so good at not getting caught, not being seen. Donut Lord had only found him in the garage that day because he'd been in an absolute panic over all the government agents and dogs and drones and-

He forced himself to take a deep breath.

He'd be fine.

He'd be fine.

He'd be-

The door to the office opened.

Sonic was relieved he was *not* the only one who flinched. Knuckles redoubled his grip on Maddie's arm and she winced, which had him stammering whispered apologies. She patted his hand.

"Wachowski, party of five?" The person who stood in the open doorway wasn't exactly what Sonic had pictured back when he used to crawl through the open window. He'd imagined a middle-aged man with a stern face, high forehead and a round middle, half-moon glasses, a sweater vest under a tweed jacket. Someone who spoke in a German accent, or maybe vaguely British.

Instead, Tom was striding forward to shake the hand of a woman who looked like she'd fit right in with the rest of his teachers.

She gripped his father's hand right back. "It's great to see you again, Mr. Wachowski."

"Tom," said his father. "And you remember-"

"Maddie, of course!" Dr. Burdette said.

His mom stood, firmly shaking her hand. "Thanks so much for fitting us in."

The woman's smile was warm. There wasn't much assuming about her; from the red glasses pushing back her hair to the bleach stained jeans. She was wearing a bright shirt that said *Don't Make me Use my Therapist Voice* in large, Minecraft font.

It occurred to Sonic, a little too quickly, that the shirt was bait.

What better way to talk to three teenage boys than make yourself look like they could talk to you.

He wondered if that perspective would change once she realized who'd been breaking into her office more than one time.

Whether or not she knew he'd figured her out, her gaze still turned on the three boys.

"Let's see if I can figure this out." She pursed her lips, pointing towards the smallest of them first. "Miles?"

"Tails," Tails said, quickly. "That's what everyone calls me."

"Everyone calls me Alice," said the woman, smiling. "Sound good, Tails?"

The youngest of the three grinned back, nodding.

Knuckles was next. He narrowed his eyes when she correctly guessed his name.

"Do you possess the same Sorcery as Mother?" He looked towards Maddie. "Is this something all Earth Women have?"

Alice gave Maddie a look.

"I'm good at flipping pancakes," Maddie explained.

"Ah." Alice looked like she was trying hard not to laugh, pressing her lips tightly together. "No," she said, as seriously as she could manage. "Your parents gave me your ages. You just seemed the most… *mature*."

That was enough of a compliment to have Knuckles' defenses dropping almost instantly.

"It's true!" He thumped his chest, startling another patient sitting a few seats away. "I am the *most* responsible! Mother says so! Isn't that true, Mother?"

"Very true," said Maddie.

Alice's lips twitched, and she breathed past another laugh, instead turning away from Knuckles to stare down at the only child left. "I got those two right. So that means *you're* the famous Middle Child." He cocked his chin up. The move had her grinning again, and it made his guts twist a little tighter. "Sonic, right?"

He nodded stiffly.

She lifted a single brow towards the glasses on her hairline. "Your parents told me that you're quite the *talker*."

He chewed on his tongue, steeling himself. "Nah," he said, trying hard to sound as cool as he possibly could. The type of cool that *didn't* break into therapists offices in bouts of absolute panicked loneliness. "I don't really talk that much. Silent and steady. That's me."

"That is *patently* untrue!" Knuckles declared. "Mrs. Healer Alice, my brother talks *endlessly*. I have had to punch him once or twice, like Father's alarm clock!"

“Right. Well. We won’t be doing that *here* ,” said Alice. She kept her gaze on the three kids before opening her office door. “Why don’t we get started? I hate to cut this conversation short, but I don’t think the waiting room is the best place to talk about *punching*.”

There were a few couches and armchairs in the room. Maddie and Tom took the smaller couch, Tails between them. Knuckles took an armchair for himself.

That left the chaise lounge for Sonic.

The same chaise lounge he’d sat on after he’d broken into this same office, dumping traumas on the little noise machines and waterfalls.

He squirmed.

Something about this was seeming scarier by the minute. Notwithstanding the bundle of hurt he kept just behind his ribs, like winding thorns.

But on top of that…?

His parents were trying their best to help the three of them. To help *Knuckles* . They’d mentioned once or twice that having counseling on his record might even have helped sway anyone looking at the eldest’s file.

And he was about to *ruin* that for everyone.

The moment this woman realized who he was?

“So!” she said brightly as he gingerly sat down. “We’re keeping things simple today. Light, casual, just some ‘getting to know you’ time. That sound alright?”

“Sure,” Tails chirped. His heels tapped against the couch as he swung his little legs.

Knuckles frowned. “I do not understand. Mother and Father are exchanging currency in order for us to be here, should we not be, er, ‘getting our money’s worth’?”

Alice turned a smirk Tom and Maddie’s way. “Cut’s right to the chase, this one.”

“Always,” Maddie said, her own lips curled upward.

“There’s no rush, bud,” Tom said.

“But-”

“Knuckles, if there are important things you think you and I should be talking about,” Alice addressed him, “then absolutely we can talk about them when it’s just us. To start though, I want to focus on getting everyone comfortable. I mean, it looks like you lift weights.” The assumption had his eyes gleaming. “This is just the stretch before the workout.” She turned to look at Sonic, whose elbows were locked as he tried to keep the majority of his weight off of the chaise. “Would that be alright?”

The echidna followed her gaze, and his furrowed brow smoothed a bit. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Excellent. Now. If you’ll indulge me, I’d like to start with something that might seem… a little silly.” As they watched, she pulled pads of paper and a box of colored pencils from her desk drawer. “I was hoping you’d each draw me a picture of your family.”

“For real?” Sonic quirked an eyebrow.

Tails was already trotting across the room to grab his supplies.

“Like I said. Indulge me.” Alice slid the pads and pencils to the far edge of her desk, smiling kindly as the fox kit gathered up all of them. “I’m not looking for the Sistine Chapel or anything. Just a quick sketch.”

“Do you make all your new victims do this?” Sonic asked, trying to make the joke roll off his tongue.

Tom gave him a look.

Alice smiled. “Actually, I do. I’ve had the good fortune of having a number of great artists come through here. No pressure, of course.” Her joke landed a little easier than his did. It set his teeth on edge.

Maybe because something about this felt… familiar.

Tails held a pad and pencil box out to him, his smile pure innocence.

Sonic accepted them, scooting to lean his back against the chaise, so he could rest the pad across his legs.

Tails moved on to Knuckles, who was already peeling off his gloves to better handle the delicate drawing implements, and then clambored back up to sit with Maddie and Tom. “I’m not that good at people,” he admitted. “I’m better at machines and stuff.”

“The best I can do is stick figures,” said Alice. “In fact- hey, Mom and Dad. You want to try your luck against these artists?”

Tom and Maddie were more than happy to jump in.

Maddie was a half decent artist. Enough that she could draw a pretty okay looking dog, fox, echidna, and hedgehog.

“Why do I look like that?” Tom peeked over her shoulder. She quickly hid her pad and elbowed him.

“No looking.”

“You made my head too big!”

“You sure about that?”

“And my hair doesn’t look so *spiky* .”

“I’m a vet. I’m better at drawing animals,” she said, glancing at his pad. “What’s your excuse?”

“I studied for a full *minute* to draw like this.”

“We’re taller than the house.”

“Still not a competition,” said Alice, hiding her smile behind a pamphlet.

“Everything’s a competition at home. Especially between them.” Tails took a break scribbling the grass around the house to point his pencil at Sonic and Knuckles.

“Mmmm. Yeah.” She nodded. “I have a big brother, too. I get it.”

“Even though I am the best at *everything* ,” Knuckles said as he added a third rainbow and star cluster around Maddie.

“The right?”

“Oh yes. I have won the sports and the babysitting *and* the Olive Garden.”

“Didn’t know that was possible…”

“It is,” said Knuckles, seriously. “Only if you defeat the unlimited breadsticks.”

“That was a pity prize,” muttered Sonic.

“*You’re* a pity prize,” Knuckles snapped back before drawing an extra *Loser* above Sonic’s head for good measure.

Behind his own sketch pad, Tails sighed.

After five minutes, Alice called time. “So. Tell me about your family.”

Maddie and Tom went first, sensing the hesitation from their three boys.

Maddie’s wasn’t half bad, even if Tom made sure to make fun of it.

“This is why I made you look like *that* ,” she said, pointing to the stick figure with squiggly hair. She showed it off dramatically, explaining each component. They were similar to Tom’s (whose artistic talents had much to be desired).

The two of them had drawn the house, Ozzie, themselves, and the three boys.

“They’re lovely pictures,” Alice complimented.

“You don’t have to lie to him,” Maddie scoffed, but her smile was fond.

Alice crossed one leg over the other, sitting back. “Tell me about it, then.”

They thankfully left out the list they'd handed to her earlier on, instead describing each boy in turn as they pointed through the pictures. They told Alice that Tails was kind and brave and could assemble an IKEA cabinet without the instructions. Knuckles was their eldest. He was resilient and strong and didn't punch the toaster as much as he used it.

Alice's eyes went from one child to the next as their parents spoke. Sonic felt hers on him as his mom and dad talked about his latest baseball achievement and how he could ride the horses at the ranch. She was looking at him like she could see straight through him. Maybe it was just a look she'd perfected. He swallowed.

"Those are *lovely*," she said, turning her attention back to his parents at last. "And that wraps up the first fifteen minutes of of time together. Tom, Maddie, I'm going to ask you do go back to the waiting room, and I'm looking for a volunteer from the boys to-"

Knuckles' hand shot up immediately.

"Well that was easier than I expected," the therapist laughed. "Alright then. Sonic, Tails, you can step out with your parents for a little bit. Maybe draw straws for who'll be next."

Alice Burdette had never worked with aliens or mutant animals before. It wasn't something she ever really thought might happen in her career.

But she had worked with children before. Loads of them. Many from the offices of Judge Ramirez, sent her way with traumas clinging to their skin like nettles. And despite their appearance, the aliens that had been ushered through her office were almost as normal as any other kid she'd ever seen.

Even if they didn't speak with contractions.

And a little bit like the Shakespearean characters from her undergrad courses.

"Mother has told me much of this practice," the echidna said in front of her, gently cradling the picture in his hands. "She told me that both her and Father attended during moments of great struggles.

"That's great to hear." She sat back, one leg over the other. "A lot of kids who come in without any experience from their parents. It's nice that they shared that with you."

He beamed. "Mother shares *everything* with me! I am her best boy! See?" He turned the paper around, making sure to point right at the little picture of himself, squarely beside the stick drawing of Maddie. One of the rainbows around her head pointed down towards him with the label MOTHER'S SON floating just above it.

Beneath Tails and Sonic he'd written, *the other two*.

Alice did her best not to snort.

"That's great."

“It is,” he agreed. His smile widened. “Does this mean I have *won* at the Therapy?”

“Don’t think you can win at this, hon.”

“I can win at *everything*.”

“So I’ve been told.” She tapped her pen once, twice, before pursing her lips. “Just… playing devil’s advocate for a second-”

“I would win that game, too,” he muttered.

“-is there something you *haven’t* won?”

That caught him off guard, and he blinked. “I… win at many things.”

“Right, yeah. And I can’t *wait* to hear about all of them. I’m just curious.” She tilted forward on her chair, sensing his hesitation. “Listen. I used to play plenty of sports myself. And I was *really* good at them. Soccer. Softball. You name it. Anyway, I decided to take up swimming for a summer, and I figured I’d be great at that too. I was pretty good at the other stuff. But lo and behold…” she shrugged, “I came in last place every time. Totally bruised my ego at the time. The teenage me was *not* real happy with losing. I’m sure that’s something we’ve got in common.”

Slowly, he nodded.

“So,” she said. “Any sports that you’re not taking up? Or something maybe you’re trying to get better at? Maybe something a little more challenging than a never-ending pasta bowl?”

His throat bobbed. “Perhaps…?”

“Perhaps?”

He looked down at the paper in his lap, and despite the ticking clock, she kept her eyes fixed on him. This wasn’t usually how her sessions went. Not the first ones, anyway. Usually those were reserved for getting to know what a client enjoyed, how they were at school, what they were looking forward to, what kind of friends they liked.

Then again, she had a feeling this family was going to be full of exceptions.

“I think…” he said, swinging his feet, heels nervously bouncing off the edge, “I think I am not winning at Adoption.”

“I don’t think you can win that, either.”

“You can,” he assured her. “Sonic has. Tails very well may.” His jaw tightened. “I do not know if that is my destiny.”

Alice drew in a breath, letting out a long sigh. “I was gonna wait to talk about that for another few sessions. But your parents told me about how there’s some issues with the government and your adoption process. Is that what you’re talking about?”

There was another nod, though he didn't meet her eyes. They were fixed on the little rainbow on the page.

"That must be hard," she said.

"It is… not my favorite thing, no."

Mentally, Alice ticked off that they'd need to work on processing and describing grief and anger.

And maybe on contractions, too.

The clock was ticking on, and they only had a minute or so left. Still, it felt like too sour of a first note to leave on.

Her chair was close enough to his that she could kick one of her feet out, landing a gentle bump on his sneaker. "Hey," she said. "We'll talk about that later, alright? But for what it's worth, your parents described you as a pretty great big brother. I'd say that's winning at Family. *That's* worth something, right?"

She got another shrug for that, but the beginnings of a smile were starting to twitch upwards again.

"How about this," she offered. "We're going to come up with some prizes, you and I."

His gaze fluttered back up.

"We'll make a list of things you can do at home to win at *family* . Each time you check one off, we'll talk about it after we go through the not so nice stuff. Sound good?"

It did, and he excitedly hovered over her shoulder as she crafted a few, basic items, tearing them out of her notebook and handing them over.

"I *will* win at this!" He assured her, moving towards the door beside her.

"Oh, I'm *positive* you will."

She opened the door at him, hiding her face behind it to laugh when he charged into the waiting room with the declaration of, "MOTHER, I'M WINNING AT THERAPY. THE NICE DOCTOR SAID SO."

Tails was next.

"Sonic totally cheated," he told her before he'd even sat down. She pretended not to be surprised when his tails whirred to life and he lifted himself onto the chair, dropping down.

She laughed. "He *cheated?* "

"I drew the short straw." He paused. "Well… I drew the short sugar packet. It's all we could find in my mom's purse. She doesn't have straws."

“And you weren’t supposed to draw the short straw?”

“I calculated it all right!” He threw his paws into the air, his drawing flapping back and forth. “I *knew* which one was going to be shorter! But he *distracted* me and took it before I could.” He slumped backwards onto the chair. “He’s being a total baby. Which is *my job* , by the way.”

“Is it?”

“I’m the youngest one! But no one sees *me* sweating in the waiting room.”

Well. That was interesting.

Something about Sonic had rung some sort of a bell in her head. She wasn’t sure why. But there was something familiar enough about him that her interest was piqued.

But these 15 minutes weren’t for that, and she could figure him out when he finally slunk into the room. She almost wished he’d come in first, anxious to pick her brain over the infamous middle child.

For now, though, she had someone else to talk to.

“Well, *I’m* glad you’re here, Miles.”

“Tails!”

“Right. Of course. I’m glad you’re here, *Tails* .”

He was less reserved than his eldest brother had been, bouncing against the well worn cushion. Energy rolled off him in steady, controlled waves.

“Why don’t you tell me about your family.”

He was more than happy to. “They’re *amazing*,” he intoned, showing off the drawing. It was more technical than the others. Every person was labeled with neat, careful writing. The house's address floated over, the garage labeled meticulously as a laboratory.

“You’re an inventor!”

“I’m pretty good at it.” He was being humble, she could tell. Practically crawling out of his skin to talk about each and every little thing he’d made.

“Your parents mentioned you were very handy,” she said, and watched him beam. “Anything you’re working on at the moment?”

“Oh *lots* of stuff!” he said. “And now that Dad and Sonic and Knuckles made me my workshop, I’ve finally got a place to keep it all.”

“That certainly was kind of them.”

“It was *amazing!*” he gushed, waving his drawing around again. “I’ve never had a place that was just mine before. And there’s so many drawers and pegs- I’ve even got room for new tools! Dad said next time he goes to the hardware store I can pick something out!”

“That sounds like quite a treat.”

He laid the paper down in his lap, smiling down at it. “They know I love it, but I don’t think they really get just how much it means.”

“Have you told them?”

“I… think so?”

“You think so?”

He fiddled with the picture, turning it around in his paws. “I’m not always good at talking. Sometimes words don’t make much sense?”

“You’re talking fine now.”

“Yeah, but…” he shrugged.

She got it. She did. It wasn’t new for kids to struggle expressing themselves, even if the family they came from was almost abnormally happy to express their own feelings. As much as Tom and Maddie offered safety and support, sometimes kids had to grow into those things on their own.

“You know,” she said. “Sometimes you don’t need to use *words* to tell someone something. Is there any way you’ve been trying to show them?”

His eyes lit up. “Oh!” Flipping the drawing around, he showed her what he’d put down on the page. Above the house, he’d begun to draw little equations and notes, arrows pointing to certain spots across the structure and land. “I’m gonna put in monitors! See?” He pointed to a few of the different spots. “We’ve just- it’s been a hard few months, yunno. Especially after the break in. That was before I was there.” He added in the last part quickly before she could ask. “Mom and Dad; they just want us to be kids, but we’re *always* going to have threats coming for us. That might sound paranoid, but…”

“But it’s something you’ve experienced.”

“Yeah.” He tilted his chin up. “I’m not afraid,” he insisted. “Or, maybe I am. Sometimes. But I don’t want them to worry, because I know they do. Even if they don’t say it.”

The list Tom and Maddie had handed over was practically burning a hole in the bottom drawer of Alice’s desk. She hadn’t looked at it that day, but there was the vague memory of bullets beneath Tails’ name. A story of constant rejection and movement from one home to another.

Alice had known more than one child that floated into their office after an adoption hellbent on doing everything they could for their new family, overflowing with an explosive mixture

of love and desperate fear. A need to protect what they'd finally gotten.

"Um, Ms. Doctor Burdette?"

She blinked, waking up from where she'd drifted away in thought. "Sorry?"

"This is okay, right?" He showed her the picture again, nerves coming off him in waves. "You think they'll like it?"

When she said, "I do," she completely meant it.

The last five minutes of his session was mostly used to talk about school and projects and what he wanted to talk about next session. She didn't bring up anything difficult. Much like with Knuckles, she didn't want to press anything too early on. When she ushered Tails out, he was bright and chipper all over again, floating towards his parents, landing squarely in front of Maddie before handing her his picture and leaning against her legs while she rooted through her purse for the Gameboy Tom had dropped in a few days ago.

Sitting a few chairs away, Sonic looked just about ready to pop.

Alice leaned against the door. "I don't bite," she promised, showing her teeth. She clicked them together.

He squirmed on his seat.

"She speaks the truth, brother," Knuckles said, looking up from the magazine Tom had handed him. "Tails and I are both unbitten."

"Speak for yourself," Sonic muttered.

"I just did," Knuckles said. "Father, I spoke for myself! Is Sonic unwell? Sonic, do you not understand-"

"He gets it," Tom promised. He looked around Knuckles. "Come on, bud. You're up. Fifteen minutes."

Sonic squirmed again.

"The faster you go in, the faster we go back for lunch," his father added, "Burgers wait for no man or hedgehog."

That at least got Sonic sliding off the chair. He rolled his shoulders, and Alice very near fell over when the blue blur shot past her, the hedgehog very suddenly sitting in her office, feet swinging. "Ready to get my head shrunk when you are," he called out.

The last thing Alice saw was Maddie rolling her eyes before the office door closed.

It was clear right away that Sonic was avoiding the chaise, even though he'd sat on it at the beginning of the session. Now he stared at it, like it had a hit on him.

“I promise you that, along with not biting, I also have never once shrunken a head,” Alice said as she retook her seat. “But if you really don’t want to talk to me, that’s your call.”

Sonic kept his eyes on the chaise. “What do you want to talk about?”

“I want to talk about what *you* want to talk about.”

“Gonna catch the Rockies game this afternoon? Double-header against the Giants.”

“I was, actually,” she said.

His head whipped away from looking at the chaise.

“I grew up in the midwest,” she said. “Chicago Cubs were my first team.”

He scoffed. “Lame.”

“They won a few world series’!”

“*Two*.”

“More than the Rockies.”

He rolled his eyes. “They’re *gutsy*. That counts for more.”

“Does it?”

“Oh yeah. Everyone loves an underdog.”

She bit back a laugh. “And the Cubs aren’t?”

“Not even *close*.”

Nodding, Alice flipped through the notebook on her lap. “So. You’re going to watch baseball. Anything else not-head-shrinking you want to tell me?”

“I’m a local celebrity. So that’s pretty neat.”

“And so humble, too.”

“That’s what my Mom says! She keeps telling me to look the word up, but who even has that kind of *time?”*

“Your mom sounds like my kind of lady.”

“She’s alright…”

“From what they told me, you and your parents sounded pretty close.”

That caught him off guard. “They told you about me?”

She didn't want to bring up the specifics of the list. It would be an invasion of their trust, and too much to handle for a kid on their first session. But the surprise was real enough that she felt like she could, at least, bring up some of what they'd told her on that first meeting, crowded in her office nervously going through each of their kids and what made them worth every ounce of attention and love they got.

"They did," she said. "They told me a whole lot about you."

"Like what?" There was a nervous twinge in his voice that spoke volumes, and she suspected there was definitely a scheme or two under this child's belt that had caused more than a few migraines.

"Nothing crazy," she promised. "But they told me that you were an only child for a little while. Which I wouldn't have ever guessed, by the way you and your brothers seem like you've known one another your whole lives!"

"It's only been a couple months," he admitted. "Mom and Dad I've known for- well, I mean… *I* knew them a lot longer than they knew me…"

Instantly the lightness in the room deadened. That had been one of his bullet points. "It had to have been quite an adjustment, finding yourself in such a big family so quickly."

He nodded.

"But worth it, I hope?"

The darkness in his eyes lessened. "Absolutely."

"Do you mind if we look at your picture?"

It was a little ripped around the edges. A nervous habit, she surmised, that went beyond waiting rooms and therapist couches. When he didn't immediately turn it around, she instead held out her hand. "Do you want me to look at it? Maybe you can just answer any questions I have."

"Um… okay?" There was at least some relief that he wouldn't need to give the play-by-play. "Not much of an artist," he murmured, as he slid it onto her desk.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." She picked up the paper and sat back in her chair. "I see you're right in the middle."

"S'a good place to be," he shrugged. "Mostly."

"It's nice to be surrounded by people who care about you."

"Yeah." He drummed his fingers on the seat of the chair. "Specially after bein' alone so lon-" His eyes widened as he bit his lip. "I mean-"

"You knew your parents longer than they knew you," Alice echoed his words back to him. "I understand."

He swung his legs out, heels hitting the underside of the chair. “Yeah.”

They sat quietly for a moment, only the sounds of Sonic’s drumming fingers and swinging feet filling the space. Alice laid the drawing down on her desk and opened a drawer. “You know, a year or two back, I thought this office was haunted.”

“What?” The boy looked up at her again.

She was holding a little spiral bound notebook in one hand. “Mmhmm. Every few months, I would find things written on this pad that I didn’t write.” Out of the corner of her eye she watched his muzzle turn pale. “There were other things, too. A footprint here. A weird blur on the security camera. Nothing much else. But there were these *notes* .”

His voice shook when he asked, “W-what sort of notes?”

“Just a phrase or two each time, a sketch, an occasional full sentence.” She flipped through the pages, looking between the words scrawled there and the names labeled on the family portrait. The matching handwriting was all-too evident. “I was certain I had on my hands a very sweet, very funny, very *lonely* little ghost. I burned sage. I bought crystals. But the notes kept appearing. Until that, er, *tornado* tore through town a year and a half ago. Suddenly my little ghost just… *poof!* Vanished. To be honest, I sort of missed him. I just sort of hoped he’d gone to a better place.” She looked over her glasses at the hedgehog in her chair. “I’m glad I finally got to meet you, Sonic.”

He gaped at her.

He swallowed.

He choked. “I’m sorry-”

“No need to be.” She shook her head. “You cost me a fifty cent notepad. If coming here on your own was of some help, I’m so very glad of it. Though I hope that I, myself, can be even more helpful. I know your parents have talked to me about weekly sessions. If you think you’d like that.”

He swallowed again. “I… yeah, I think I would.”

“Excellent.”

Mother's Day: Part 1

Chapter Summary

In which a particular Earth holiday causes a kerfuffle.

Spring continued its slow thaw. The three Wachowski boys resumed their lives like they had before; school, baseball practice, weekend games, and now, thanks to the two eldest, spending long hours in Tails' laboratory, trying very hard not to blow anything too important up.

And so when another minor holiday was announced during morning announcements in three separate classrooms, it was met with casual joy from two and reverence from one. Sonic and Tails were definitely more than a little confused when Knuckles paraded home declaring that *The Holiest of Days* was upon them.

"My people also had lavish events to celebrate our Gods and Goddesses for the bountiful harvests and good seasons," he explained, pounding at his chest. They were in Sonic and Tails' room. Sonic was lying on his stomach on a baseball shaped rug. Tails was hanging upside down from the bottom bunk. Knuckles had taken up residence on a bean bag, using it as a soap box to wax on about his tribe's traditions. "It was a sign of respect for the deities that cared for our people and ensured they would not smite us down!"

"That's cool and all, dude, but you do realize that we're talking about Mother's Day here, right?"

"I do not see a difference."

"Your celebrations were for, like, actual *Goddesses*," said Sonic, carefully creasing some of his best cardstock paper in half for a card he was intent on hand-making. "This is just for Mom."

Knuckles' gasp could have shattered the windows.

"Calm down, dude!"

"*Just!?"* Knuckles looked very close to pouncing on Sonic. He stood on the bean bag. "In my tribe, you would be dishonored for calling the Gods anything but mighty!"

"Mom's not a God, dude."

"*Dishonorable*."

Tails had to go and get Tom when a fight broke out in the attic, and he dragged his two eldest sons apart, sitting them both on the lower bunk and fixing them with looks. “You’d better have a good explanation,” he said, arms crossed.

The two of them began talking at the same time, quickly overlapping one another with a chorus of *he has dishonored the Great Goddess*- and *I didn’t do anything wrong he’s the one who*- until Tom had to wave his hands to cut them both off. “Okay. Slow down. *What’s* going on?”

“Knuckles is taking things too literally. *As always.*”

“That is hardly the problem here, Father! Your *disgrace* of a son has tried to place dishonor upon my clan’s deities!”

“I did *not*! I just said that-”

“Do not repeat yourself, *vile Tree Owl!* I do not wish you to poison the words again with your foul tongue!”

Tom pinched the bridge of his nose. “Okay. So. If I’m getting this right, Knuckles is upset because Sonic… disgraced his Gods?”

“Goddess. Singular, Father.” Knuckles raised his chin. “He has brought shame to your world's holiest of days.”

“Holiest of- sorry, what day?”

Tails tugged on Tom’s pant leg. “He’s talking about Mother’s Day,” the youngest whispered up to Tom.

“Mother’s Day? Why would he be talking about- Oh. No, Knuckles, that’s not- that’s not actually a *holy day*.”

“I was hopeful you might have taken my side, Father, but I would expect nothing less from the mouth of the *Green Hills Dallier.*”

"It was one poster!"

"Philanderer!"

Tom pinched the bridge of his nose. "Look. Mother's Day is this coming Sunday. Just… make Mom a card. If you want to give her something nice, you can. You know what she likes!"

"Nothing we have here is worthy."

"I'm sure she'd love it if you got her something because you thought of her, bud."

"I'm making her an exercise watch!" Tails piped up from Sonic's desk where he was sketching out plans.

“That’s a great idea.” Tom said. “Try not to overthink it. It’s just a day to show Mom you appreciate her. Which you do *every* day already.”

“Which is why this *cannot* be like every other day!” Knuckles insisted. “There should be dancing in the street! Mother deserves it!”

“Ya see what I’m dealing with?” Sonic rolled his eyes. “Just make her a card, Knucklehead.”

“No, that is *not* adequate,” Knuckles folded his arms. “Mother should be *worshiped*.”

Tom sighed, patted the boy on the shoulder. “Why don’t you *talk* to Mom about it? Ask her how she’d like to spend the day. And then we’ll see if we can’t make it happen.”

This was deemed a satisfactory solution (no one knew what Mother wanted better than Mother), so the echidna broached the subject as he dried the dinner dishes that evening. At first, she’d demurred, telling him she knew they all loved her and didn’t need anything grand. But as he continued to press, she paused over the suds-filled sink, considering.

“You know… no, nevermind.”

“What?” He wrung the dish towel in both hands, watching her.

“Nah, forget it. I don’t wanna hurt your feelings, baby.”

“You could never.”

She smiled down at him. “I was just thinking that I can’t remember the last time Dad and I got to spend time together.”

“You spend time together every day.”

“I mean *together*, just him and me.”

It took the echidna a moment to process the statement. “Oh…”

“See? Forget it. Forget I said any-”

“It will be an *honor* to see that your request is granted, Mother.” But he said it to his shoes and his voice wobbled.

“Baby…”

“It will make you happy, yes?” he asked, raising his eyes to her.

“Not if it’s going to upset you.”

Viciously he swiped at his eyes. “It does not! The day is *yours* , Mother. Your happiness is paramount.”

She pulled the plug from the drain and flicked the bubbles from her hands. “You’re a good boy, you know that?”

“I am the *best* boy.”

Hands dry, she cupped his face and kissed his nose. “Yes you are.”

His tail wagged. “I will see to it that you have the day you wish.”

So it was arranged. Tom was told by his eldest son, in no uncertain terms, that he was now duty-bound to see to it that “Mother is worshiped in the way she obviously deserves” and that the “children must be removed from the premises,” i.e., the boys would spend Saturday night into Sunday at the ranch with their grandparents.

At their speed, the run to the Wachowskis' Ranch didn’t take more than a few minutes. Rosie was on the front porch waiting for them, a jug of lemonade and glasses already set out on the patio. Not that she was very hard to miss. Her hair was taller than it had been the last time she’d seen them, and her neon pink lipstick matched her bedazzled jeans. “Are those my grandbabies I see!”

Sonic and Tails were on her like flies, buzzing around, telling her about school, downing their glasses and asking for seconds and *are there cookies?* Before bounding away to go see the horses.

Knuckles was much less enthusiastic than his brothers, shuffling across the porch to accept a glass. "Mother did not want us present for her day," he muttered at his grandmother's questioning look.

She laughed. "Well shoot, sugar. Everyone needs a break every now and then!"

He nodded glumly as he took a seat on the porch swing. Rosie set the pitcher down and sat next to him, rocking them both gently. “You know your Mama loves her job, right?”

He quirked an eyebrow.

“But does she do it all day, everyday?”

“No.”

“Because if she did, she wouldn’t love it as much. She needs to step away, recharge the ol’ batteries, right? It’s the same with raisin’ babies. You gotta step back once in a while so y’all don’t get sick of each other.”

He grunted thoughtfully.

She ran her bright red nails through his quills. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder, after all.”

“So, tomorrow - Mother will love us *more?* ” At his grandmother’s firm nod, he brightened. “Ahh. Well. Which way were these horses of yours?”

She pointed him in the direction of the stables and he jogged off after his brothers.

The ranch was as close to a kid's paradise as it could get. Sonic had loved going since he first met his grandparents, and it was awesome to see the way Tails and Knuckles embraced it just as quickly. Acres of open land speckled in wildflowers, sectioned off with pens for different animals that lazed about, trotting over to see their favorite alien when he zipped over with sugar cubes or handfuls of oats.

Their grandfather was strolling out of the back to meet them and hefted Sonic onto his shoulder when the boy ran up for a hug, Tails and Knuckles close behind. "Biscuit's been real anxious to see you again. Just remember-"

"I know," Sonic took the offered sugar cubes carefully and jumped down from his perch to hand a few off to his brothers. "Don't run too fast around them."

"S'right. You'll spook'm."

Biscuit was seemingly overjoyed to see Sonic, who was uncharacteristically gentle and calm around her, petting her nose and offering her sugar cubes and apple slices. At his grandfather's urging of *help your brother* , he showed Tails how to do the same, holding the boys hand out when he was too afraid to get it close, showing him how gentle she was. Tails lit up when she began to snuffle his palm and took to the ritual quick enough.

Knuckles had to climb up on the first rung of the fence to be at eye-level with the creature, watching in awe as Biscuit took the sugar cube from his palm. "Its teeth are flat."

"Yup," Big T said.

"It…does *not* eat meat."

"Nope. Mostly grass. And oats."

"You're telling me that this *mammoth* creature subsists on *grass*."

"Yup."

"But it is mammoth!"

"Takes a lotta grass."

Knuckles whistled low, impressed. "Perhaps Father was right when he insisted I eat my vegetables."

"Don't tell your Grandma that. She'll have you eatin' them until the cows come home."

"Are the cows not already home?"

Sonic pet Biscuit's nose again, laughing. "He means that she'll try and make you eat more."

"Ah."

“Which isn’t a bad thing,” Sonic rushed to explain. “Grandma’s the *best* cook.”

Knuckles glared up at his brother. “Blasphemous. Mother and Father provide sustenance for us.”

“Yeah, but just wait until you try her bricut. Right grandpa?”

“Too right. Think she’s got that on the menu t’night once she knew you were comin’.”

“Did she make-”

“Wouldn’t be a visit with you if she didn’t make strawberry rhubarb crumble.”

“*Yes!*”

They spent the morning feeding the horses, and attempting to ride them. Tails took to it quickly, but Knuckles wobbled once, and then declared that he preferred to keep his feet on the ground. He made himself useful driving posts into the ground in places where the fence needed repairing. Then the other two wanted to be useful, so Big T found them afternoon projects.

Tails drew up schematics for a wind turbine to put out in the west pasture. Sonic ran around the property looking for more spots where the fence needed fixing. Knuckles hefted an old rusty tractor out from the edge of the property and carried it all the way back to the barn.

Tails cleared the gutters in record time and without need for a ladder. Sonic generated enough wind to dry the laundry on the clothesline in minutes. Knuckles baled hay one-handed.

They kept so busy, none of them even had time to miss Mom and Dad until after dinner (which was just as excellent as Sonic promised, and Knuckles agreed that perhaps it was not blasphemy to say that their grandmother was a better cook than their parents) when Rosie got a text. “Well don’t they make a pretty picture,” she cooed, before turning the phone to show the boys the selfie their parents had taken at the restaurant.

“Aww,” Tails said, then went for another forkful of strawberry-rhubarb crumble.

Sonic wrinkled his nose- “Mushy stuff.” -but grinned as well.

“I suppose she *does* look happy,” Knuckles conceded.

“What’d I tell ya?” Rosie said, setting the phone down. “When they come to pick you up tomorrow, they’ll be all recharged and rarin’ to go.”

“This really couldn’t wait?” Sonic grumbled as he scaled one of his favorite trees in the back yard behind Knuckles.

Tails hovered silently alongside him. “They’re coming to Granma and Grandpa’s in the morning,” he added, voice just above a whisper. “You could find out *then* if the day was

good."

"I won't sleep until I know for sure," Knuckles said, his own voice a hushed rumble. He climbed up onto a sturdy branch and Tails settled down beside him. "Once I see she is contentedly sleeping, we can go back."

"She looked content enough in that picture they sent," Sonic reminded him, clambering up onto the branch as well.

"Photographs can mislead." Knuckles scanned the house with narrowed eyes. "Which window is theirs?"

"Prob'ly the one with the lights on," Tails yawned, pointing.

"Ahh. Yes. Hmm. I need a better vantage than this." Knuckles moved to the trunk, climbing higher.

"This is so stupid," Sonic sighed, but he continued the climb behind his brothers.

"How come the light's on anyway?" Tails asked. "It's past bedtime."

"Mom and Dad have a later bedtime than you," Sonic said, poking his baby brother under the ribs as they found a new, higher branch.

Tails scooted down the branch, peering down towards the lighted window.

"I'm telling you, this is dumb," he called to Knuckles in a whisper-shout. "Mom's gonna be reading and Dad's gonna be putzing on his phone. What's that gonna tell you about how the day went?"

"Uh…guys?" Tails said.

"I will *know*," Knuckles insisted, twisting around to face Sonic. "I am excellent at reading body language."

"Guys?" Tails said again.

"Oh please." Sonic rolled his eyes. "You're the dictionary definition of obtuse, dude!"

"You take that back!"

"Guys!" Tails raised his voice enough that the older two turned. "What, um, uh, what're they *doing?* Wrestling? And where's their pajamas?"

"What?" Sonic crept further down the branch. "Mom and Dad don't-" He blanched. "Oh god."

Knuckles shoved himself between them, frowning. "Of all the foolish-" He nearly swallowed his own tongue as he got a clear view through the window. " ...*Mother?"* he squeaked.

The branch chose that moment to bend under their weight and with a chorus of shrieks they tumbled back to the ground.

“Oh *no*,” Sonic grabbed Tails’ hand.

“What! I don’t get it!”

“*Oh no,”* the middle child screamed again. “We gotta- uh- let’s just- *Oh No!*”

“*I have done this to you, brothers. I blame myself!”*

“*You should! You- oh GOD.”*

“What’s going on!”

“It is my fault, Tails. My fault that you had to witness-”

“We need to get back to Grandma and Grandpa’s *right now*,” Sonic shouted over his brother.

“But he asked-”

“*Right now, Knuckles.*”

“Ah. Yes. We are shielding the young one.”

“Shielding me from-” Tails’ eyes shot open, horrified. “Oh *no! Oh no! Mom and Dad were-”*

“Back to the farm!” Sonic shrieked, and grabbed both his brothers’ hands. There was a three pronged streak of red, blue, and yellow, and then the lawn fell silent.

“Did you hear that?” Maddie put a hand on Tom’s chest and he raised himself up from where he’d been very happily nipping at her ear.

“Hear what?”

“I swear I just heard the boys screaming.” She pushed herself up on her elbows, craning her neck towards the window.

“S’just your mom brain playing tricks on you,” he told her, lowering his head to kiss her collarbone. “Forget it. C’mon, let’s get back to worshipping, hmm?”

She let her gaze linger on the window for just another moment, but then her husband was trailing kisses down past her navel and she was pleasantly distracted from all thoughts of the boys.

The sound of the barn door creaking on its rusty hinges was all it ever took to rouse Rose and Thomas Wachowski, Sr. Rose sat up, leaning against the hand carved headboard, hair tight up in curlers. “Thomas? You hear that?”

“Probably just the cows again,” Thomas Sr. yawned.

“That is *not* a *cow*, Thomas.”

“The chickens, then.”

The barn door slammed shut behind itself, and her husband shot up.

“Tell me that was a chicken,” his wife hissed. “Chickens don’t open doors.”

Before Thomas could say another word, a violent collection of screams had the both of them jumping out of bed. Thomas grabbed the salt gun he kept under the bed.

“Thomas!”

“I know-”

“That sounded like the boys! *Oh*, Thomas!” She shoved her feet into slippers, the two of them racing as fast as their old bones could take them. “You think it’s that Robot fella’? God, Thomas, if he tries to take our grandbabies-”

“He’s not getting them if he’s gotta go through us.”

They got to the kitchen, and she grabbed a knife as they passed the counter, heading towards the back door.

The walk to the bark was pitch dark, but the two grandparents knew their way, bolting through the grass, carefully avoiding the small dips and ditches as they ran towards the screaming.

“Don’t worry, boys!” Rosie yelled back just as they reached the barn doors. “We’re comin’! Ain’t no one takin’ you away from… us?”

Thomas ran in behind her and lowered the salt gun, urgency falling away to make room for confusion. “What in the Hell’m I lookin’ at Rosie?”

Sonic hunched over the work sink, water running and scrubbing his face. “Can’t… unsee…” he mumbled from between his fingers.

“Sonic…?”

“It’s burned into my eyeballs!” he wailed.

On the floor beside the sink, the fox kit was tying his tails in a knot. “See, this is why I’m not a field guy,” he told no one in particular. “But-but it’s just biology! That’s science! We like science! We’re not grossed out by science! But, but, oh *jeez, oh no, oh wow we just saw* - Keep it together, Tails! Keep it together! It’s science! It’s just science! But *ohhhhh jeeeez*- ”

“I just wanted to give Mother a good day,” Knuckles sobbed from where he was lying face down atop a very confused Biscuit. “My hubris has cursed us. Do you understand that,

Master Biscuit? I've *cursed us*."

Sonic glared at him from across the barn. "This is *your fault*."

"I knooooooooow," Knuckles moaned, sliding down from the horse and curling up in the straw.

"You just *had* to go see!" Sonic snapped. "And now we *all* saw-" He dry-heaved, and shoved his head back into the sink.

"Oh for Heaven's sake!" Rosie said, fists on her hips. "Were you three off peepin' on your parents?"

At the chorus of wails, Tom Sr. shook his head. "Good lord." He turned on his heel.

"Where're *you* goin'?"

"Back to bed. S'too late for this nonsense."

Rosie tsked after him, rolling her eyes. "Useless old man." Then she turned back to the disaster that was her three grandchildren, whistling sharply. All three looked up. "Get over here, all of you."

They did so slowly, shuffling like zombies until they were gathered in a semi-circle before her. Sonic kept rubbing his eyes, Tails twisted his tails, and Knuckles hugged himself tightly. Rosie turned her attention to him first. "So you're the idea man tonight, huh?"

He nodded at his shoes.

"Got more than you bargained for, didn't'cha?"

His muzzle burned nearly as deep red as the rest of his fur.

She put a hand on his shoulder, and one on Sonic's, steering the little group back to the house. "C'mon now. Think this calls for a good old fashion kitchen-table talk."

"We really don't have to," Sonic said, fighting in vain to keep his own blush from creeping up his neck. "We could just, you know, go to bed? Pretend none of this ever happened? Be silently scarred for the rest of our lives?"

"Not a chance, sugar."

So they sat at the kitchen table and drank milk warmed on the stove, and zealously avoided eye contact with each other.

"You know I'm gonna hafta tell your mama and daddy, right?" Rosie asked as she put the saucepan in the sink.

"What?" Tails gasped.

“Why?” Sonic whined.

“‘Cause you’ve got the world’s worst poker face, darlin’,” Rosie said, eyes twinkling as she joined them at the table. “They’d know something was up the minute they walk through the door. Or *you* all could tell them.”

“Oh jeez,” Tails said. “Oh jeez, oh jeez, oh *jeez*.”

Sonic wilted behind his mug.

“I will tell them,” Knuckles said, squaring his shoulders even as his lower lip trembled. “I am the one who has dishonored Mother by violating her privacy.” The last word wobbled and he inhaled sharply, blinking hard against fresh tears of shame.

Their grandmother reached out and patted his big hand.

“But then they’re gonna wanna *talk* about it.” Sonic’s words were smushed by the table, where he’d laid his head.

“Which is only as big a deal as you make it,” she told him. “Now, *you* I’m sorry had to learn it like this,” she pointed at Tails, “but the two of you? Surely you had to have realized that your parents are sexually-”

“Don’t say it!” Sonic said, hands on his ears.

Knuckles hid his face in his hands.

“Child, they are consenting adults and the sooner you learn how consenting adults behave, the better.”

“But it’s *groooooossssss*.”

“It’s *not*. It’s perfectly natural-”

“La la la la la not listening!”

She leaned over, flicked his nose and he quieted, pouting.

“S’just biology,” Tails said, clutching his cup hard. “It’s just *biology, just biology, we’re not scared of science, just biology-”*

Behind his hands, Knuckles groaned. “Mother did look… happy. Before we fell out of the tree.”

“I should hope so.” Rosie clicked her nails on the table. “I didn’t raise my boy to be a selfish lover-”

“Stop, stop, I’m begging you!” Sonic cried. “I’m sorry, alright?”

“Me too,” Tails said.

“I have *never* been more remorseful.”

“You tell *them* that, tomorrow.” She stood, gathered up their cups. “Now back to bed. And maybe you’ll think twice before sneaking out again.”

“I’m never going to think about *anything* ***ever again*** .” Sonic practically melted out of his chair.

“I don’t know how I’m ever going to think about anything *else* ever again,” Tails lamented. “Maybe I could invent a memory-eraser-”

“Yes please,” Sonic said.

“No memory-erasin’!” Rosie hit the kitchen light and herded them up the stairs.

“ *Ohhh* ,” Knuckles clung to the banister as if it were the only thing keeping him upright. “I *told* him to worship her! What was I thinking?!”

“How could you do that!” Sonic waved his hands about. “You gave him the idea!”

“I have dishonored our brotherhood!”

“-just science-” Tails said to his feet.

“Lordy you boys are a dramatic lot,” the woman chuckled. “It’s *just* sex-”

“I thought you were gonna stop *saying* it,” Sonic whined, dragging his feet down the hall.

She opened the door to the bunk room they all shared. “Go on, in. And stay this time, gosh darn it.”

With a sleepy, embarrassed, miserable chorus of ‘goodnights’ the trio climbed into their bunks, and she shut the door.

“I’m not gonna be able to sleep,” Sonic groused into his pillow. “Everytime I close my eyes I see Dad’s-” He dry-heaved again.

“I didn’t realize it was gonna be so *pale*,” Tails said quietly.

Sonic gagged again.

Mother's Day: Part 2

Chapter Summary

In which the Wachowski family has The Talk.

Tom and Maddie were having a fantastic morning.

Tom went out to grab bagels and coffee that they ate on the couch through three episodes of a new true crime documentary they'd had on their saved lists for ages, but had kept in their back pocket for fear of scaring their kids. The last thing they needed was a bunch of supersonic, all powerful children paranoid about Ted Bundy.

"This was really nice," Maddie said, leaning against Tom from where they were lying across the couch.

He hummed, kissing the top of her head, reaching for his coffee again.

"Is it so bad that I feel *guilty* we had a nice day away from the kids."

"I know." He tipped his head against hers. "I kept thinking the same thing. But…"

"But?"

"It was nice."

"It *was*."

"I don't think we've really had a night to ourselves since Sonic got here. And now with three of them-"

"You don't have to tell me." She stole his coffee, taking a long sip before wrinkling her nose. He always took his too light and sweet for her tastes. "Who'd'a thought. Us. *Parents*."

"Not me. But I must say, Mrs. Wachowski. We are *rocking* it."

"We really, really are."

Another episode wound down and Maddie stretched, not wanting to get up from where she was lying. The house was so deliciously quiet. There wasn't the sounds of fighting or skating down the hallway (where it was absolutely not allowed). Then again, there also wasn't the sound of their little voices excitedly telling her about plans for the day, or their hands grabbing hold of hers when they wanted a hug. "I miss'm though," she said, more to herself than anyone else.

Tom responded anyway. “Me too.” He paused. “But we’re still not picking them up yet, right?”

“Oh, absolutely not. I am *not* sacrificing this quiet while we have it.”

He laughed and started a new episode, content to lie back and enjoy their peaceful little morning while they still could.

Which was exactly when his phone rang.

“Ignore it,” Maddie said, turning the volume up on the television just as the narrator began talking about a police chase. “It’s probably just spam.”

He checked the screen anyway and frowned. “It’s my mom. The kids might just want to say good morning.” Maddie poked his arm.

“Call them back later. Say we slept in.”

He clicked off the screen and snuggled back down.

A moment later, his phone rang again. Maddie groaned. “One of them had better have broken an arm.”

“How motherly of you.” He swiped his screen and put it on speaker. “Morning, Mom! Me and Maddie here!”

“Hi Rosie!”

“Well good morning, sugars! How was your quiet weekend?”

“Perfect, thanks to you.”

“Well,” his mother cooed. “You know we’re always happy to have the boys over.”

“How are the boys anyway?”

There was some noise in the background of pots and pans moving about. “Well, actually darlin’, that’s why I wanted to call.”

Tom and Maddie sat up. “Oh man,” Maddie said, looking ready to jump off the couch and run to the car. “Are they okay?”

“They’re just fine, Madeline! No bruises or bumps here! Well- except…”

The parents barely got a chance to relax before they were both tensing on the couch again. “Except what, Mom?”

“Your eldest got it in his head that he had to fulfill some honor-bound duty. Lord knows what that boy’s got goin’ on in his head.”

“Yeah,” said Maddie, slowly. “He gets like that.”

“Anyway, apparently he went back to your place last night with the other two in tow. Bunch’a baby ducklings, Sonic and Tails are.”

“They were here?” Tom looked around, almost expecting to see Sonic popping out from behind the small potted tree in the corner. “Wonder why they didn’t say hi.”

“That might be on account of them sneakin’ about when they should have been in bed. Anyway, they came back real upset last night.”

“Why?”

“Well. It turns out that they might’ve gotten an eyeful of you an’ your wife celebrating a quiet weekend at home.”

“… okay?”

“In bed.”

“Uh huh?” Tom looked at Maddie. She shrugged.

Rosie scoffed. “Oh for goodness sakes. You Wachowski men are a bag of rocks. *Sex*, Thomas.”

Maddie very nearly fell off the couch.

Tom did.

“Oh shit!"

“Your boys accidentally peeped in on you in the middle of a horizontal Tango.”

"Oh ***shit****!"*

“The two of you sound just like them! Can’t believe I’m surrounded by a bunch of squeamish children.”

“They- I mean- when! *How!?”*

“Like I said. Knuckles got it in his head that Madeline wasn’t gettin’ the Mother’s Day she deserves - which, honestly Thomas, you could learn a thing or two from that boy and bring your Mama some nice flowers-”

“*Mom!”*

“Oh stop fussin’. Sonic tells me that he and Tails followed to make sure Knuckles didn’t get himself in any trouble and they climbed a tree in the back. And that’s another thing, Thomas. If you’ve got yourself kids with powers, you gotta remember to close the blinds. I mean really, even we know that-”

“*Still not helping, Mom!”*

Rosie scoffed. “Anyway, I told’m I’d let you know so that you can talk to them about it on the ride back.”

“Oh God,” Maddie groaned. “Oh *God*.”

“Knuckles was intent on tellin’ you himself, but I didn’t think he was in the best of minds to do it. And Sonic is in no shape to do nothin’, but he’s always been a bit of a drama king like his Daddy.”

“*Oh God, we ruined our kids.”*

“See what I mean? Drama Kings. Anyway. Figured I’d give you advanced notice so you won’t be surprised when you see the way they’re running around like the suns about to burn out and- Well good mornin’, Sonic, baby! About time you came down! Sorry, what did you- no, sir, you cannot run into the ocean this mornin’. I don’t care what you see when you close your eyes, I made bacon and it’s not goin’ to waste.” The phone rustled, and then his mom was back on the line with them. “I gotta go, Tommy. Your boy has gone and shed quills all over my floor and- Sonic, I see you tryin’ to sneak out, sit your little tailed butt down.”

“But *Gramma!”*

“But nothin’! You wanna say good morning to your Mama and- Oh lordy, now he’s gaggin’ again. Thomas, I’ll call you back. The other boys are comin’ down now and- Tails, I don’t know what that is, but it better not be for memory erasin’ and it better not be made out’a any valuable antique-”

The call dropped.

Tom let the phone fall to the coffee table, and, as he was already on the floor, just laid down there, hands over his face. “Oh my god.”

Maddie pressed her hands together at her heart, took a deep breath, let it out slow… and then kicked her husband lightly in the stomach. “I *told* you!”

“What?”

“Last night! I *told* you I heard them screaming.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Geez, how much did they *see?*” Her eyes widened and her hand dropped. “Were you going down on-”

“No!” He sat up quickly. “No that was… after. I don’t think they could’ve seen much of *you*.” He groaned as he pulled himself back up on the couch. “*Me* on the other hand…”

Maddie rubbed his back. “M’sorry, babe.” She leaned over, rested her chin on his shoulder. “If it makes you feel better, an eyeful of your butt doesn’t make *me* want to run into the ocean.”

Tom snorted, then twisted to catch her around the waist. “Listen, lady, this wouldn’t be so funny if it was *your* butt.”

“Fair, fair,” she conceded. “But I got you to smile, didn’t I?”

He nodded and kissed her cheek. “But still… I think the boys should just… live with my parents from now on. We gave it a go, but they’re clearly the superior caregivers.”

She slapped his arm. “Oh quit it. This isn’t the end of the world.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. If we don’t act like it’s a big deal, then it can’t be one.”

“Somehow I don’t think the boys will agree with your logic.”

She slipped out of his arms. “Come on, then. Let’s go test it.”

“What, now?”

“Putting it off won’t make it any better,” she told him as she headed for the stairs.

“Again, finding fault in your logic there.”

But within the hour they were showered, dressed and on their way to the Wachowski Ranch. Tom had spent the entire car ride practicing what he was going to say while Maddie blasted a meditation tape like it was the new hottest single of the summer.

“Listen boys,” Tom said, over and over. “Sometimes, when a man and a woman - no wait. When a- when a *person* and *another person* - shit, no, wait, sometimes when a life form and another life form love each other very much? - or sometimes when they just meet up one night in a bar or swipe right on Tindr which none of you are allowed to do until you’re at least twenty one, even though I’m not sure aliens have Tindr which you’d still not be allowed to go on anyway-”

“Breathe in, breathe out,” Maddie chanted. “I’m calm. I’m so fucking *calm* .”

“You don’t sound calm,’’ he muttered.

Maddie very calmly glared at him and very calmly resisted the urge to calmly throw her coffee and calmly shriek out the window. Calmly.

“Weren’t you the one saying this was only a big deal if we make it one?”

“Well, that was before I had to listen to you ramble about Tindr for forty minutes,” she snapped. “Sorry, sorry. Just. Just running in my head what sort of *questions* we’re going to have to answer that I am *so* not ready for. And what if they *don’t* ask questions?? I don’t want them *googling*! They’re going to get the wrong information! I mean, I knew we were going to have to give them The Talk at some point, but I didn’t think it would be like *this*. God, I should have had a book ready to go. I have them on my Amazon list, but I thought I had more time! They’re just *kids*.”

“Knuckles is *sixteen*.”

“But he’s such an *innocent* sixteen.”

“Not anymore.”

She slapped his arm again, and went back to chanting.

The boys were already in front when they rumbled down the driveway. Though it looked very much like the last place they wanted to be. Rosie and Tom Sr. had them lined up on the front porch, and for a moment, from the way each of them was absolutely flushed red, it was almost comically hard to tell them apart.

“They look like they’re on a firing squad,” Tom muttered as he parked the car between his parents truck and their prized 1955 Lincoln. “We could just… stay in the car. Forever.”

“Thomas.”

“Right, yeah.” He cut the engine. “Well,” he said, unbuckling, “Let’s go explain Marvin Gaye to our kids.”

“*Great* song.”

“Oh, classic.”

Rosie waved at them as they rounded the car, looking a great deal more chipper than the somber looks on their kids faces. “Yoohoo! Good to see you again, Tommy!”

“Hi, Mom. Dad.”

The elder Wachowski gave a nod.

“I’d tell you the three of ‘em gave us no trouble, but I hate to lie.” She tweaked Sonic’s ear, which only made his blush deepen and his head lower further.

“Yeah, we’ll be talking about that on the way home.”

“Among other things,” Maddie said, hands on her hips.

“Mother,” Knuckles said, stepping forward from the little lineup, “I will take the brunt of the blame for our eternal trauma.”

“You’re not eternally traumatized, sweetheart.”

“Says you,” Sonic muttered. Rosie pinched his ear again.

“Alright you three,” said Tom. “Into the Trauma-Mobile. Say goodbye to Grandma and Grandpa.”

There were some muttered goodbyes interwoven with Sonic's desperate pleading of *please just keep us here with you I'll do chores on your farm forever*.

"You do realize we raise chicks around here, don't you?" Big T said to Sonic, who was leaning desperately against his legs.

"Yeah? So?"

Big T gave him a look.

"Oh- *oh you're kidding me!"*

"Yup."

"Is *everything* - oh *God!"*

"We breed the horses, too," Rosie added. "You wouldn't have Buscuit if it weren't for-"

"To The Trauma Mobile!" Sonic shouted, and with a blur of light and a gust of wind, he was gone and buckled into his seat.

"Good luck!" Rosie told them as the other two somberly climbed into the van.

"Thanks," Tom said weakly.

"Sorry again, for-" Maddie started.

"Oh, forget it," the older woman waved them, "Couple'a years and this is gonna be hilarious."

"Couple decades, maybe," Tom said. His mother patted his cheek, and then they were off.

The ride down the driveway was silent, save for the sounds of their children's heads about to explode in the back. Maddie rubbed her face, giving Tom a look. "So," Maddie began.

"HOW ABOUT THEM ROCKIES!" Sonic shouted. "SOLID SEASON, I THINK!"

"Sonic," said Tom.

"Sweetheart." Maddie started to twist in her seat, but the horrified look on all their faces had her turning back towards the road. "We *have* to talk about this."

"Do we though? I mean, really?"

"Let's put it this way, bud," Tom said, turning out of the driveway onto the dirt road. "You participate in an awkward conversation, and no one has to get grounded for sneaking out of Gramma and Grandpa's house."

"I'd rather be grounded."

“My brothers should not be punished for my transgressions,” Knuckles spoke up. “I was the one who insisted we-”

“No, no, everybody’s responsible for their own actions,” Tom said. “Sonic and Tails could’ve stayed put. Or talked you out of it. Or gone and gotten a grown-up.”

“*ALL* things I *sincerely* wish we had done,” Sonic said. “Isn’t just having seen-” He put a fist to his mouth. “Isn’t that punishment enough?”

“Not a punishment,” Maddie said. “A consequence. Which is also what this talk is. We’ve gotta clear the air so we can move past it.”

“Should’a made the memory-wiper,” Tails mumbled, chin in his hands.

“Look, guys,” Tom rallied again. “We’re sorry you saw- what you did.”

“Not sorry it happened,” Maddie added. “We’re adults who *thought* we were alone, and what we do alone isn’t any of your business. But we’re sorry you saw it.”

“And next time,” said Tom, “we’ll lock our door and shut the blinds.”

“*Next time*.” Sonic threw his hands in the air. “Oh my *God* . I’m living in a brothel!”

“I told you,” Knuckles muttered.

“Just biology,” Tails chanted under his breath.

“Baby, you have *no* idea how many times we’ve done it since you came to live with us.” Maddie did twist around this time. “And we need to get some things straight here. Because the pair of you seem to have some *gross* misunderstandings about what a healthy adult relationship looks like. Do you even know what a brothel *is??* ”

Knuckles raised his hand. “It is where concubines engage in horrifying activities over soup.”

“No, Knuckles.”

“Then I wish not to know.”

“Remind me to get you a book,” Maddie pinched the bridge of her nose. “But bottom line. You live in a house with parents who are *consenting adults* and love each other. And honestly! I don’t understand why you think this is so *foreign*! The three of you had biological parents at some point!”

“How dare you imply that,” Sonic snapped. “I was only *yours*.”

“That’s very sweet of you to think so, honey, but that’s not really how it works.”

“So you were trying to have a baby?” Tails asked. There was something like fear in his voice, and Maddie could see it flitting across. Looking carefully though, she saw the same across the other boys' faces,

“No,” said Maddie, oh so gently. “No we weren’t.

“Sometimes it’s just for fun, guys,” Tom said, trying to sound casual and failing.

Knuckles wrinkled his nose. “...Fun.”

“Yup.” Maddie popped the ‘p’ sound, twisting back to face the road, running her palms down her thighs rhythmically.

“Like base of ball.”

“Not exactly,” Tom said. “Like we said; it’s for *consenting adults*. And if any of you end up *wanting* to do that one day when you’re old and gray like us, you’ll do it. Or you won’t. Some people never do. That’s fine, too. It’s not the only thing adults do in life, and it’s not the only thing that matters. But look, the bottom line is, you’re in the house with *us*, and we *do* do it on a pretty regular basis, which means you should at least be aware. Got it?”

There was a grumbling chorus of *yes, Dad* from the back of the car.

“Besides,” Maddie added curtly. “If it wasn’t for that *gross stuff*, you wouldn’t be here and we wouldn’t have you. So if anything, just see that as the silver lining.”

“I still resent you think that,” Sonic muttered. “I was flown into a nest by Keanu Reeves.”

“Uh huh.”

“My birth parents chose the blue pill.”

“Mmmhm.”

“That’s why I’m blue.”

“Sure. And is this before or after they had-”

“*Ugh!”*

Tails and Knuckles hid laughs behind their fists, which was a good sign Maddie and Tom supposed.

“M-Mother, I *am* sorry we intruded on your… your adult activity.”

“I know, baby.”

“If you- um, you said something about, er, a book?”

“I will order you a book.”

“Thank you.”

“And the rest of you,” Maddie fixed them with looks. “We’re going to work on *respecting people’s privacy*, yes?”

There was another chorus of “Yes, Mom.”

“Great.” Tom said. “See. That wasn’t so bad.” He leaned over to flick on the radio.

*‘Let’s get **physical!** Physical!’*

“Oh, *come on!”* yelled Sonic.

Tom winced and hit the next preset station.

‘Well, I guess it would be nice if I could touch your body-’

“Dad!”

Tom hit the button again.

‘With nothing on but the radio, Feel the music playing soft and slow-’

“Are you kidding me?!” Sonic hid his face in his knees.

“I swear,” Tom said, fighting to keep from laughing as Maddie met his eye. “I’m not doing this on purpose.”

“Well, boys,” said Maddie, twisting around to look at the trio of horrified faces behind her, “at least now you have the answer when people ask if it’s any different to be aliens in a human family.”

“That is a comfort, I suppose,” said Knuckles, perking up. “Though I am far superior to a human child.”

“You sure are, pumpkin.”

“So,” Sonic asked, slowly, once he’d garnered the nerve again. “You’re *really* not trying to have a baby?”

“We’ve already got the right number of fantastic kids, thank you very much.”

“That’s good,” Sonic added, playing nonchalance even as she saw the way his shoulders sagged. “I wouldn’t have changed any diapers, anyway.”

Sonic wouldn’t ever say it, but it was something of a comfort. Despite its acceptance, Green Hills had its smattering of naysayers, and it was even worse outside of their little bubble. People who glared and hissed and said how unlucky Maddie and Tom must be; that they might have been second options. He’d heard the whispers himself, from just behind them. The telltale rumors of *they couldn’t have their own children so-* or *it’s just unnatural that they’d take in a-*

In the times Tom and Maddie heard, they always spun on their heel and grabbed their children's hands, one of them pulling the kids away while the other stayed in defense. One

particular time Tom had politely told a blonde woman that despite what she might think, those *were* his real kids, and that she could go step on a lego.

It had left Sonic with his own quiet moments, curled away until Maddie or Tom dragged him out again with hugs and promises that he was *perfectly theirs* .

But if Maddie was right (and she always was) their little family wasn't much different at all.

There were breakfasts, and fights with siblings, and baseball practice and cell phones taken away and arguments up the stairs and nights out on the deck eating hot dogs and laughing when Dad tried to prove he could do a backflip, much to Maddie's chagrin.

And on bad days, there were awkward talks about sex with parents in the back of a minivan.

So even though it royally sucked, it also felt like a huge *told-you-so* to the small swarm of people that thought their family was anything but normal. They were their own sort of normal. But the moments that mattered, the little bits of childhood, were the same as any other healthy family.

And even when it wasn't awesome…

that at least was a little awesome.

One Half of a Good Thing

Chapter Summary

In which something important comes in the mail.

And honestly, things continued to be awesome as Spring began to wane and the end of school was just in sight. Tails spent most of his free time in the little DIY laboratory or trailing after Tom and Maddie with home improvement ideas. Knuckles was beginning to shyly invite friends over, and was likewise being dragged out on weekends by gangly high schoolers going out on the trails or wanting to see local minor league football games (a sport that Knuckles was coming to adore, even if he rooted for all of Tom's opposing teams - a rivalry that the house wasn't nearly prepared for).

And Sonic continued to try.

Try to be the best brother. Try to keep Knuckles happy. Try and try and try to make sure that his brothers always knew they were *Wachowskis* as much as he and his parents were.

Which, in hindsight, left them woefully unprepared when the envelope arrived.

It arrived while they were out getting groceries. Tom and Maddie had made the decision to drag *everyone* along with them, ignoring the string of complaints.

"But it's *Saturday!"* Sonic was still in his pajamas, waiting for his Dad to finish making bacon. "Why do we have to do that on a *Saturday!"*

"Because we said so. That's why."

"But grocery shopping is bo-oooo-ring!"

Tom snorted. "Uh huh."

"Can't I just stay home! Ozzie's so lonely when we're all gone!"

"Ozzie's fine."

"*Dad*."

"*Sonic*." Tom ignored the way his son rolled his eyes. "Here's the thing. Knuckles eats like a truck, and Tails actually *wants* to come, and you're too picky for your own good."

"Am not!"

“Whenever we come back, you’ve got a million complaints about whatever we pick out for you. So this time, *you’re* gonna pick out what you want. And *no*, it won’t be just candy and chips. Don’t think I haven’t been noticing the way our pantry's gotten emptier.”

Knuckles looked up from his smoothie. “I… consume too much?”

Maddie was quick to touch his shoulder. “You eat what your body needs, baby. It just happens to be more than most full-grown humans need.”

“‘Cept sumo wrestlers,” Sonic said. Tom flicked his ear.

Despite her reassurances, the echidna’s brows knit together. “Acquiring sustenance requires an exchange of currency, does it not?”

Maddie caught his look as she took her plate to the dishwasher. “Don’t go getting ideas. We can feed you just fine.”

“You acquire currency through your work.”

“Bud…” Tom said, picking up the scent of where the conversation was going.

“Travis works,” he continued, referring to a classmate. “After school. Perhaps I should-”

“Not necessary,” Tom said.

“But-”

“No ‘buts’,” his father said. “We’re doing just fine. We can take care of it.”

“You need to focus on school and being a kid.” Maddie came up behind him, both hands on his shoulders. “You let us worry about the grocery budget.”

“But-”

“Nope, nuh-uh.” She gave him a gentle shake. “We’re your parents. And we’ve got it covered.”

“You wanna help with the grocery bill? Help Mom clip coupons.” Tom reached across the table to chuck the boy on the chin. “Beyond that, don’t worry about it.”

“You’re sure?” Knuckles still looked unconvinced.

“Very.” Maddie ducked to press a kiss to the top of his head. “Now. Let’s get moving. Sonic, c’mon, let’s put today on it.”

For the fastest being in the Universe, Sonic truly knew how to drag his feet. But they all eventually ended up in the loser cruiser, buckled in and heading out to the middle of Green Hills.

Most of the town was accustomed to seeing the Wachowskis out and about, and so no one batted an eye at the family rolling through the aisles. Tails sat cross legged in the cart while Maddie pushed, Knuckles securely riding on the opposite side, hanging on and facing Maddie, adding in whatever she called out from the list. Sonic, who was absolutely *bored* out of his mind and making that everyone else's problem, zipped around the store trying to discreetly add whatever he could to the cart.

“These were not approved by Mother!” Knuckles said over and over, removing bags of chips and Oreos and sour gummy worms.

“Come on, dude! That was like, a whole balanced meal!”

“Try again,” Tom said, checking bananas and strawberries off the list. “Pick out some fruit you like.”

“You said I couldn’t have fruit snacks!”

“Real fruit.”

“*Ughhhhhh.*”

“And *one vegetable* you’ll actually eat. Not one you’ll feed to Ozzie, and don’t even say you don’t.”

“I don’t!”

“Sonic.”

“Fine!”

“And no veggie chips, Sonic. Those don’t count.”

“You guys are the worst!”

They managed to check out with a loaded cart relatively painlessly, packing up the car and blasting the radio all the way back. It wasn’t the most relaxing way to spend a Saturday morning, but it wasn’t exactly a bad way, either. The kids were all smiles, they had a week’s worth of grocery shopping already done, and nice enough weather to spend the rest of the day outside.

And, like it tended to, the Universe apparently thought that would be the perfect moment to drop a boulder onto the little family.

Like a well-oiled machine they filed up the porch steps, arms full of reusable totes, eyes forward, Tom juggling his armload along with his keys, so laser-focused that he didn’t even see the envelope until it was under his foot and he stumbled. “They heck-” he managed, as Knuckles shifted bags around to free up a hand to steady him.

“Perhaps we need to work on *your* stance as well, Father.”

“No, look!” Tails said. “He tripped on the mail.”

As the only one with a hand free, Knuckles picked up the thick, yellow envelope, scanned the return address, and went wide-eyed. “Mother!” He held it out to her.

STATE OF MONTANA

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

“Oh god,” slipped through Maddie’s lips before she cleared her throat. “Okay! Um, everybody inside! We’ve got ice cream melting out here.”

Tom had the door open and was holding it with his shoulder. “C’mon, guys, you heard Mom.”

There was a mad dash to get inside. Maddie placed the envelope on the counter, and they did their best to ignore it, but it was too big of a presence to push away. The instant the last cereal box was stacked in the pantry, they were all staring at it as if it might explode.

Sonic drummed his fingers on the counter. “So… I mean, we gotta open it, right? Like ripping off a bandaid.”

“Yeah,” Tom said, but he made no move to reach for it. “Yeah.”

“Or we could *not*,” Tails said. “Right now, it’s like… Schroedinger’s adoption papers. Simultaneously accepted and not. We could just, uh, live in the limbo for a while.”

Maddie bit her lip, looked around at the faces of all of her boys, and shook her head. “No. No, it’s better to not sit on it.” But her hands still shook as she picked up the envelope and peeled open the seal. She took a long, slow, deep breath -and heard her husband and children all do the same- and pulled out the stack of papers. Her eyes scanned the top page rapidly, and smiled. “Tails, you’ve got it!”

“I *did?!?*” the fox kit squeaked.

“You *did!!*”

He floated up to see for himself and she caught him around the middle, pulling him to her side, as the kitchen erupted in cheers. Skinny arms clung to her neck and she felt wetness as he pressed his cheek to hers. “I got it…” he whispered. “I got adopted.”

She nodded, blinking back her own tears. “Gotta go sign a few more things at the courthouse, but yes! Oh baby…”

The little body in her arm shuddered. “I- I never thought I’d- thank you for wanting me.”

She turned to kiss his cheek firmly. “How could we not? Hmm?”

He tucked his face into her neck. “Love you, Mommy.”

Tom swiped at his eyes with the heel of his hand. “We love you too, bud.”

Sonic’s grin could have split his face, elbowing Knuckles back and forth as they crowded around their parents' feet, their bodies two blue and red blurs. The blue one came to a sudden halt with an exclamation of “oh wait!” and he snatched up the envelope to take out the rest of the papers.

His hand froze when it ducked into the empty pocket. “Mom?”

Madie paused as she was peppering her youngest’s face with more kisses.

“Mom, there’s- there’s nothing else?”

“No, honey - that’s what yours looked like, too. The first haul was heavier, and like we said, there’s still more to sign at the courthouse-”

“No, I mean-” he cut himself off and twisted around to look at Knuckles. The echidna had gone silent, eyes drifting from the happy family down to the empty envelope in Sonic’s hand.

And it sank in, all at once. A wave passed through the kitchen, the little group softly drowning underneath.

Tom reached down and took the envelope before kneeling in front of a waiting Sonic. “Bud. I think that’s it.”

Sonic shook his head. “That *can’t* be it.”

“Sonic-”

“Maybe- maybe it got lost in the mail!” He looked back at Knuckles, shrinking into himself, before darting to look back at his Dad. “Or maybe they didn’t deliver it yet!”

“Bud-”

“We could go to the post office! I bet it’s there! If we- if we just *ask*- or *call her!* The Judge’ll know what to do!”

“Mom?” Tails’ eyes glistened. “*Mom, did Knuckles not-*”

“Tails, honey, it’s okay-”

“It’s not okay!” Sonic couldn’t stop, couldn’t stop, couldn’t stop-

“Bud, you *gotta* stop.”

Sonic swiped at his eyes, head shaking enough to make the room spin. Tom tried to reach out, tried to place his hands against the boy's shoulders, but Sonic pulled away. "Why aren't you *trying* . Why aren't you- That *can't be it! It just- it can't-*" A sob was building traitorously in his chest, the hedgehog feeling smaller and smaller under the eyes of his family. He couldn't breathe right, couldn't seem to find the words to tell them how unfair it was, how this happy moment couldn't exist unless everything lined up the way it should have, couldn't stop the crackles of electricity as they built under his skin and pulsed around him, filling his ears like he was being dragged under water.

It was a surprise to all of them, when it was red-furred arms that caught him up tight, stopping the spiral. "Brother, you must breathe."

With a gasping, choking, sob, Sonic clung.

Clung, clung, clung.

And with his big brother's heartbeat thrumming steadily in his ears, he breathed.

"It is all right."

"No it's not."

"Perhaps. But today is Tails' Day of Triumph. There is plenty cause for joy."

Sonic lifted his head, blue still flickering behind the green of his eyes. "You're sure?"

Knuckles nodded. "My heart is full for my baby brother." He looked up at Tails, still held against Maddie's hip. "A celebration is in order, I think."

Their mother's eyes shone. "What did you have in mind, baby?"

"It it Tails' Day of Triumph," he said again. "Tails should choose."

Tails wiped at his eyes. "Are you sure?"

Knuckles nodded. "A warrior must celebrate all triumphs in battle."

That at least got a watery smile out of the youngest. "Could we get hamburgers?"

"You sure that's what you want to do?" Tom looked at Tails over his shoulder as he tugged Sonic into a much needed hug, finally confident enough that he wouldn't get shocked. "You can choose anything."

"Hamburgers," Tails said. "And *shakes*."

"Then that's what we'll do." Maddie kissed Tails' cheek again. "It's almost lunchtime anyway. I'll grab my purse. Tom-"

"I'll grab the keys."

Maddie went off, still carrying a tentatively happy Tails, but Tom took a minute to hang back. In his arms, Sonic was doing his best to settle his breathing again. “Knuckles, why don’t you go help Mom.”

“You are sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Knuckles gave his younger brother a worried look, but trotted off anyway, leaving Tom and Sonic on their own on the kitchen floor.

“You alright?”

Sonic hid his eyes against Tom’s shirt and nodded.

“I get it, bud. I do.”

There was a muffled sniffle from somewhere against his chest. “Sorry…”

“You don’t have to be.”

“S’Tails’ day.”

“Yeah, but this hasn’t been easy on any of us.” He squeezed Sonic tighter. “But looks like it’s been a lot harder on you than we might’ve thought, huh.”

His son made a choking noise and nodded again. “S’just… I *know* what it feels like to be alone, and I don’t want Knuckles to feel like- to feel like *that*. It *sucks*.”

“It does. I *know* it does. But he’s not alone. He’s got us, right?”

“Yeah,” Sonic croaked.

He kissed his son between the ears. “We’re getting through this as a *family*, okay?”

Sonic finally peeled himself away, scrubbing at his face. “Okay.”

“Think you can handle going out for lunch?”

“I might be able to,” he sniffled again, smile wobbly, but growing. “If I’m allowed to get a whole chocolate shake to myself, I might survive.”

Tom threw his head back and laughed, standing and reaching for Sonic’s hand. “You really know how to play your cards, don’t you?”

“I don’t know what you mean, Father.”

Tom snorted, tugging Sonic to the bathroom to wash his face before they left. “I think a milkshake can definitely be arranged.”

Out To Lunch

Chapter Summary

The Wachowskis go out to lunch to celebrate, and things don't go exactly as planned.

The diner was full to the brim when they arrived, enough that they had to put in their name with one of the wait staff (who very kindly bumped them up a few places in secret once she heard about the occasion).

“Oh that’s just *amazing*,” she gushed, looking over the little family. “I always see you guys around town. Wish I’d been here to see the huge battle, but I was away at college, so-”

“You didn’t miss much,” Tom assured her. “It’s so much better when they’re *not* taking down giant robots. Don’t know how much my blood pressure can take while they’re out playing hero.”

“Hey!” Sonic said, preening under the waitresses' praise. “I’ll have you know that I’m a *spectacular* hero, thank you very much. Tough as nails, that’s what they call me.”

“Mother calls you Blueberry,” Knuckles said.

“Dude!”

They waited outside for all of twenty minutes before they were ushered through to a booth. Sonic took the window seat opposite Tails, Tom dropping down next to him. Maddie elected to sit next to Tails, opposite her husband, Knuckles sitting stoically beside her before she dug through her purse and extracted crayons, handing him the red one.

“I’m too old for that stuff,” Sonic declared until Tom tried to take the blue crayon and he snatched it away with a cry of *“you know that’s my color!”* before starting a game of hangman with his brothers on the paper placemat, explaining the rules as he drew.

“So you are saying that this man’s life hinges on my *vocabulary*,” Knuckles said as the same waitress from before came by and handed them menus. “That is barbaric.”

“It’s just a game,” Sonic explained, counting out 25 dashes below the cartoonish gallows.

“That is what the Gods say about war before they cut away lives like ants on a hill, you *tyrant.*”

“Mom, he’s doing it again.”

“No one’s dying, hun,” Maddie said, scanning the menu. “Stop calling your brother a tyrant.”

Knuckles grunted. “Fine. I shall play your game of life, and I shall vanquish this town of its *executioner*.”

“Totally. Okay, guess your first letter.”

Their waitress, whose name they learned was Sama, came by to take orders. Maddie and Tom ended up speaking for the whole table, Knuckles nearly bent over with anxiety over the fate of the little stick man, guessing each consonant and vowel like it was a game of Russian Roulette.

“There must be a Y!”

“Sorry, no Y.”

“*Curses* . Do not fear, Tiny Stick Man. I will not let him end you, like he has your brethren.”

“They’re a fun bunch!” Sama took out her pad, jotting down their orders (four burgers, one chili dog, three chocolate shakes and one strawberry to split between Maddie and Tails). “They always like this?”

“Usually it’s a lot louder,” said Tom, as Knuckles guessed a B and gasped, horrified, when Sonic added an arm.

“I’m sure your house is a blast.”

“You’re not there for the fights.”

“*I am failing your tribe,*” Knuckles bemoaned to the little stick man, dropping his head on the table. “May he rest well in the battleground in the sky.”

“What about a C?” Tails said, leaning on the table.

Sonic added three letters.

Knuckles’ head popped back up. “Haha! A victory at last! I *knew* we would not dishonor you, Tiny Stick Man!”

“Just let us know if they get too… crazy,” Maddie whispered over Knuckles’ head, glad he was too engaged with saving the Tiny Stick Man from his impending doom. “They’re excited, but we know that sometimes-”

“You guys are *so* fine,” Sama assured her. “I’ve dealt with a few customers today who are just- well, you know. There’s a lady and her family here who come in every week, and her kids are absolutely the snottiest. So I promise you, you’re *fine*.” She looked over to the kids squished into the booths and grinned again. “I’ll be back with those milkshakes.”

Milkshakes arrived just as Tails guessed the final ‘S’ that completed Sonic’s puzzle and saved the Tiny Stick Man. Knuckles’ relief was short-lived as the phrase was revealed:

SONIC IS COOLER THAN KNUCKLES

“Mother! Is the Game Master allowed to use *lies*?” he demanded to know.

Maddie kept herself from laughing by taking a sip of her milkshake. “Game Master gets to use whatever words they want. But Game Master’s mother would appreciate no more insults, please.”

“I didn’t say he wasn’t cool,” Sonic protested. “Just not as cool as *I* am.”

Knuckles grabbed for the paper menu. “I wish to be the Game Master now.”

“Nuh-uh!” Sonic pulled it closer.

“Boys…” Tom said, but then Sama was back with their food and they were distracted from the argument with a chorus of *thank you* ’s instead.

“So polite,” Sama cooed while fishing in her apron for more crayons while the kids were distracted again trying to steal one anothers fries.

“You’re seeing them at their best,” Tom laughed, before stealing a fry off Sonic’s plate, shifting alliances.

“We are *always* at our best,” Sonic insisted, shielding his plate with both arms.

“Tell that to the staff at the zoo,” Tom said.

“Daa*aaaaaad!* ”

“Father, please!”

Sama just laughed, shaking her head and assuring the boys she wouldn’t pry, leaving them to their lunch. Things calmed down from there. Despite how the morning went, Tom and Maddie were happily surprised to see that spirits were higher than they’d suspected. Even happier that the boys were truly trying to be on their best behavior, exchanging gentle jibes and starting another game of Hangman with Knuckles at the stern (though he’d had help, whispering something to Maddie before she’d drawn out each little dash for him).

Sonic was elated to see that his plate had not a single vegetable in sight and swore up and down that he could finish his entire chocolate shake, even though he and Tom usually split. Tails bounced with his knees on the booth, piping up to every person who passed by their table, “I’m gonna be adopted!” and they congratulated him and the family no matter how many times he mentioned it to the same groups moving back and forth through the aisles.

Even Knuckles was handling everything as well as he could.

Every so often got a distant look in his eyes, but one of his family members drew him back quick enough.

He was halfway through his own burger when he proposed a Warriors Toast with his chocolate shake.

“It is an honorable thing to join a tribe,” he said. “I am glad to see that Tails has been accepted into one so kind.”

“*Both* of us,” Tails corrected.

“Right,” said Sonic, lifting his own shake. “No matter *what*.”

Tom pretended not to wipe at his eyes while Maddie grabbed her phone and snapped a picture.

All in all, everything was going *great* .

Until;

“Excuse me, can I speak to your manager?”

“O-oh, I’m sorry,” Sama said, to a woman a few booths down. “This isn’t my section, lemme find your-”

“I didn’t *ask* for excuses, I *asked* for the manager.”

The waitress that was assigned to that section appeared, looking haggard. “Is something wrong Mrs. Sterling?”

“Oh, I was just curious if your manager cared about how many health codes he’s in violation of right now.”

“Mrs. Sterling, if there was a problem with the food, you have to leave some of it on the plate if you want a refund, that’s the policy.”

“I didn’t say there was anything wrong with the food, though I do wonder how much *animal hair* there was in it, now that you mention it.”

“What?”

“Well, seeing as how you deign to let *wild animals* sit at a booth as if they were *people* -”

She said it loud enough that the whole diner heard her.

Tom choked on his shake, leaning over while Maddie spun around, the both of them catching the woman’s purposeful glare.

“You heard me,” she snapped.

Maddie opened and closed her mouth, Tom's fist squeezing hard down against the glass in his hand. "*Tracy Ann*?" Maddie finally found her voice long enough to choke out the name.

The woman sneered. "It's *Mrs. Sterling*. And honestly, Madeline, I'd think you'd know better than to bring *pets* into a restaurant."

"*Excuse me?"* Maddie looked about ready to jump out of the booth, Tom close to following.

"If you're going to bring *pets* here-"

"Mrs. Sterling-" the waitress began, but she was cut off quickly by Mrs. Sterling's husband.

"Don't talk to my wife unless you plan on *doing* something. Honestly. If all you need to do is slap a *support animal* label on those things, then we should all be allowed to bring our pets."

Near the window, Tails was sinking lower into his seat, clutching his tails to his chest. Knuckles' jaw was working, but Maddie could see the way his eyes were misting over, glaring down at his lap.

"Back off, Tracy," Tom hissed. "We're trying to have a day out with our *kids*. Mind your own damn business."

"Yeah," another group said across the diner, a few others chiming in with nods and their own shouts. "Leave'm alone!"

She clucked her tongue. "Really, Thomas? You've fallen far, haven't you?"

"Mrs. Sterling-" the waitress snapped.

But the woman wasn't done, gesturing to her own table where her two boys sat, leering along with their mother. " *This* is what a family looks like! Not whatever scrappy, stitched together Frankenstein you've got."

"Hey!" Before Tom or Maddie could snap back, Sonic was already standing on the booth, fists shaking at his sides. "Stop being a jerk!"

Tracy Ann's smile wavered, but perked up moments later, though her eyes had somehow gotten sharper. "Will you look at that! It speaks!"

"What the hell is your problem?!" A man from another table stood up, glaring Mrs. Sterling down.

"Why are you siding with *them*? *They're* the pretend family!"

"They're just kids out with their parents, Lady!"

"Oh come on, now!" She flitted her hands about. "If they hadn't saved your lives from some big scary robot, you'd be shipping them off to some lab where they belong. It's time *someone* had a lick of sense in this town and sent them away-"

“Fuck off. Like hell we would!” A young mother twisted around, baby in her lap.

“Can’t believe you’re teaching your kids to act like this!” said her husband, joining in. “And in front of their kids?”

“Those aren’t *kids!”* Mrs. Sterling jumped up, her husband mirroring her, the two of them gesturing wildly to the little family in the booth. “They’re *feral animals!* I mean- are we the only ones who see that! It’s just a little group of freaks and their wannabe parents! Tom at least had potential. We had our history, but this? I hate to see you settling with someone who couldn’t give you real kids, but who knew the town vet would stoop to plucking them out of the *pound* just so she could play pretend.”

“Stop it!” Sonic’s face was pinched, muzzle pink. “Don’t talk about my mom like that!”

“Sonic,” Maddie reached for him. “Baby, sit down. Let us-”

Mrs. Sterling laughed. “No, please! By all means. Let him talk!”

Sonic’s throat bobbed, his jaw quivering. But still, he stood his ground. “We’re just trying to eat lunch and celebrate because my brothers are getting adopted. Stop being a jerk.”

“Oh *please*. Those aren’t parents. They're two people who felt like playing house but couldn’t train their mutt right.”

“Just because you’re sad and lonely-”

That apparently struck some kind of a nerve. “*Watch it*.” she snapped, pointing her fork at him. “I don’t care what a scrap of paper says or what those two tell you. It would only take me *one phone call* and you’d be back in the forest where you belong, and that’d be a mercy. I’m *sure* the government would love to get their hands on something like you.”

Sonic’s face dropped, and he stumbled back against the booth, eyes blown, filling fast. His chest shuddered, breath moving in and out too quickly. “*Stop it*,” he said, voice quivering. “You’re *wrong*. I’m adopted so they can’t- they can’t touch us!”

“Oh, we’ll see about that.”

“Don’t talk to my son like that,” Maddie snarled.

“Maybe I wouldn’t need to say anything if you just *muzzled* him like the wild thing he is-”

Sonic let out a choked noise, and Tom quickly grabbed at him, tugging him down onto his lap, arms winding tight around their son. Maddie could see the way her husband’s focus shifted, murmuring something against the side of Sonic’s head.

She saw his lips moving and vaguely caught a few of the choppy phrases.

Won’t let anything -

Wouldn’t ever-

Don't worry, she can't-

You're ours, bud. You're ours-

"That's it," Hands banging on the table, Maddie finally stood, blocking the view of her son from the woman. "Leave my family *alone* or-"

"Or what! You'll sick your *pets* on me? You know what the pound does with *feral animals*, Madeline-"

Knuckles winced, flushing redder. "*Mother*," he whispered, voice broken. "Mother, we can leave-"

"Listen to your dog," Mrs. Sterling sneered.

"*How fucking dare you*." Maddie didn't mean for the words to come out.

Or maybe she did.

Yes. She did.

She definitely did.

Standing there in front of her family, her husband holding their shaking son, she meant it.

That was apparently enough for Mr. Sterling to try and play White Knight for the bleached blond shrew behind him.

"*Don't talk to my wife like that,*" he snarled, shoulders squared, trying to make himself as large as possible to scare the smaller woman who stood her ground.

"Don't talk to *my family* like that!"

Mr. Sterling was a large man. Larger than Tom and built more like a brick wall than a Father. There was nothing soft about him, from his shined and greased hair, his pressed and starched suits, to the frigid blue of his eyes and his tight knuckled fists. His too-white teeth bared, and he charged forward, ready to give Maddie a piece of his mind-

"*Step back.*"

The red blur shocked him into nearly tripping backwards, and he caught himself against one of the booths before he could tip onto his back. "What the- your dog *hit me!"*

"I did not touch you," Knuckles tipped his chin up, gaze unwavering. "You would know if I had."

"Leash your animal!" Tracy Ann screeched. "Did you see that! He *attacked my husband!"*

"We've got eyes, lady," the woman with the baby shouted. "Get over yourself."

“Knuckles, honey,” Maddie said, giving her son’s head a light touch. “Go sit down. I can handle this.”

Knuckles didn’t move.

“Listen to your master, doggy,” Mr. Sterling barked. “Get out of the way so the *humans* can have a chat.”

Knuckles crossed his arms. “No.”

“*No?”*

“No. You do not get to move closer.”

“Oh I don’t?”

“You don’t,” the boy agreed. Knuckles’ voice didn’t hitch, low and careful, barely raised. Still, Mr. Sterling’s stony posture began to crack inward. “You may insult me any way you wish,” said Knuckles. “But you have insulted my father and scared my younger brothers.” In Tom’s lap, wiping his eyes, Sonic’s chest caught with a hitched breath, Tails’ fists pressed hard against his mouth. “And what’s more, you have frightened my mother. You have not acted with honor. Say what you will, but you won’t come near her.”

“Or *what?* You’ll fight me?”

Knuckles looked him up and down, scoffing. “It is dishonorable to fight those that are too weak to defend themselves.”

There was a tittering of nervous laughter from some of the diners around them, cell phones already whipped out, facing the little standoff between the booths.

“Arthur!” Mrs. Sterling hissed. “Arthur, *do something!”*

Knuckles looked around the large man towards his wife. Recognition sparked in his eyes. “Ah. You mentioned my father before. Father?” He turned. “Is this the harlot you left for Mother? I can see why. It was a respectable decision. I commend your intelligence.”

“Arthur!”

Mr. Sterling spluttered. “*The hell did you call my wife?”*

Knuckles blinked. “A harlot,” he supplied helpfully. “Not to worry. I thought that of my father just weeks ago. I apologize, Father. I find that my definition has changed. I see a much more worthy example.”

The echidna didn’t understand the roar of laughter around them, brow furrowed.

With a growl more animalistic than anything any of the boys had done that day, Mr. Sterling reared back and swung his fist at the teenager defending his mother.

Knuckles raised a hand, open-palmed, and caught the blow without so much as a flinch. There was a scream from somewhere in the diner, followed by a distinct crunching sound, and then Mr. Sterling was reeling back, clutching his wrist.

"*Holy shit!"* Tom said over Sonic's head before he could stop himself, though it didn't look like his middle son had heard much beyond the roaring in his ears.

"You should not make a fist that way," Knuckles said, recrossing his arms. "I imagine your fingers are broken now." Behind him, Maddie clutched at his shoulders, finally managing to tug him behind her.

As her husband staggered back to her side, Tracy Ann brandished her phone. "That's it! I'm calling the police!"

"Took care of that already," came a voice from the kitchen, and the crowd turned. The diner's proprietor and cook was standing in the doorway, hand on his hips, and Sama at his side. "Now, unless you want the Deputy to physically eject your asses from my restaurant, I suggest you beat it before he gets here."

There was another wave of tittering around the diner, a smattering of *you tell 'er, Artie*, and more ca-clicks of cell phone photos being taken.

The Sterling parents looked around, trying to decide if there was any chance they could win this particular fight.

Trying to have the last word, Mrs. Sterling collected her silently glaring children who set to give the Wachowski kids glowers. "Just know," she snapped, "you've lost a *loyal customer*."

"Fine by me!" Artie scoffed. "Out."

There were cheers when they stomped towards the front. Mr. Sterling tried to slam the door, but it did little more than slowly swing shut on its pressured hinges, and he stomped out.

One of the other diners by the window shouted, "*Oh my god, Deputy Wade's outside!"*

There was a clamoring of feet and forks as diners leaned over to try and see out the windows as Wade caught the family on the sidewalk. They gestured wildly, pointing back at the diner.

Mr. Sterling showed off his hand, looking absolutely pitiful, bent over and whimpering, his fingers going a lovely shade of purple.

"You think they're gonna try and pin it on them?" A diner asked.

"Like hell they are." The young mother, baby strapped to her chest, wiggled her way through the crowd to crack open one of the windows.

"He assaulted a child, Wade!" she shouted, Wade jumping to try and find the voice behind him. "Just lettin' you know!"

He finally found the owner of the voice and lit up, giving a little wave.

“Thanks, Sharon!” he called back. “And what’s the soup special today?”

“I think it’s french onion?”

“Sweet.” He took out a notebook. “You guys are gonna have to come with me. I’ll take you to a hospital, Sir, but plan on being there for a while for processing.”

Whatever was shouted next was muffled under another bursting cheer, the diner letting out a collective sigh. Everyone began to migrate back to their seats, taking up spoons and forks again as if nothing at all had taken place.

That was a little harder for the booth in the middle, where one boy still sat quivering on his father’s lap, Knuckles’ jaw twitching, Maddie doing her best to catch her breath.

“Blueberry,” she reached across the table towards Sonic. “You’re okay, honey.”

He nodded, scrubbing at his face. “Sorry.”

“No, baby. No. You didn’t do anything. She was *awful*. God, *I’m* sorry you had to hear that.”

He nodded again, trying to catch his breath. Tom squeezed him tighter, resting his chin on top of his son’s head. “You sure?”

Sonic drew in a shaking breath. “She can’t do anything to us, right?”

“*No*, bud. No, she can’t.”

His eyes flickered to Knuckles, and Maddie grabbed his hand. “She can’t do anything to *any of you*. Okay? No one can.” His throat bobbed, and she squeezed his fingers tight enough to get his attention. “Sonic. Listen to me. I *promise*, okay?”

“Okay…” he whispered. Still, he couldn’t stop shaking, clutching hard onto his mother’s fingers, pressed harder against his dad’s chest, enough to feel the steady heartbeat through his quills.

A chocolate cream pie was placed on the table and they looked up. Artie was regarding them carefully. “Everybody alright here?” Beside him, Sama set down the plates and silverware she’d brought, collecting their finished plates.

“Little shaken up,” Maddie said, shifting Tails onto her lap. “But we’ll be okay.”

“Takes more than that to best the Wachowskis,” Tom said, smoothing down the quills that had risen like hackles along his son’s back. “Right, bud?”

“Right,” Sonic croaked.

Artie nodded, smiling. “In any case, I thought some dessert might help. On the house, of course. And hey-” He tapped on the table, catching the attention of the boys, who’d been cautiously eyeing the pie. “Those a-holes aren’t welcome here anymore. So don’t ever be afraid to come back, you got it?”

Their smiles were tentative, but they nodded.

He considered them a moment, then turned to Sama, “These kids, am I right?”

She smiled. “Tough as nails.”

“Haven’t heard nobody talk to Mrs. Sterling like this one did.” Artie nodded down to Sonic. “You got a good voice, kid.”

Sonic’s face flickered a bit more back to life.

“And this one.” Artie jerked a thumb at Knuckles. “Fist comes flyin’, he doesn’t even flinch.”

The echidna blinked, muzzle pink.

Sama turned and gave him a wink. “*Very* brave.”

Muzzle now red as the rest of him, Knuckles stared at the table.

“And didn’t I hear that somebody’s gettin’ *adopted* today?” Artie asked.

Tails squeaked and raised a hand.

“You tell me how this pie is, and if you like it, I’ll box up another one to take home,” Artie told them. “How’s that sound?”

As her boys still didn’t seem like much for articulating, Maddie said, “That’s too generous, we couldn’t ask you-”

“You’re not asking,” Artie shrugged. “Enjoy the pie. We’ll be back to check on you later.” He tapped the table again, drawing the boys’ eyes once more. “Nice work today, guys. S’no wonder your parents are so proud.”

“Yeah, we are,” Tom said as the man walked away. “So… what do we think? Plates? Or just, five people digging into this pie with forks?”

The boys stayed uncharacteristically silent, Sonic clutching onto his Dad’s hands, Tails twisting his duel tails tight, Knuckles’ shoulders stiff, as if he was waiting for Mr. Sterling to come back for round two.

Maddie picked up her own fork and scooped a bite straight out of the middle.

“Guess that answers that,” Tom chuckled. “Well, c’mon guys, don’t make Mom and I eat this alone.”

Tails was the first to pick up his fork. Maddie bumped against Knuckles’ side, and slid a utensil his way, making enticing *mmmmm* sounds and grinning. His shoulders relaxed as he picked up the fork.

Across the table, Tom bounced his knee, jostling Sonic. “You really gonna let your brothers have the whole pie?”

Sonic was staring at the fork in front of him, when someone else approached the table.

“Hey.”

They all looked up again. Sharon was swaying, in the way new mothers do, her baby sound asleep in the carrier strapped to her chest. “I gotta jet, but listen, just ‘cause people are gonna throw shit at you don’t mean you gotta take it. So just, ya know, keep not takin’ anybody’s shit, okay?”

The teen couldn’t help the tiny snort of laughter that slipped out. “Yeah, okay.”

“Thanks Sharon,” Maddie said, trying not to smile too widely, lest her boys think she condoned that kind of casual language.

The young mother grinned, offered a finger-gun salute, and then strode out of the restaurant.

Sonic picked up his fork at last. “I like her, Mom.”

“Eat your pie,” Maddie said.

So he did.

A Quiet Night

Chapter Summary

In which the Wachowskis have a quiet night at home, and sleep comes less-than-easily.

For all his talk about not wanting to be treated like a baby, it was sometimes difficult to pry Sonic away from his parents once he let his guard down. So he'd stayed on his Dad's lap while they ate pie until Tails engaged in a softer game of Hangman and the second pie was delivered to their table with *CONGRATULATIONS* written across the box.

Even after that, Sonic's hand stayed firmly clutched in Tom's. And when it wasn't in Tom's, when the car doors were closed and the family was driving down the road, he instead reached across the aisle and folded it against Tails' wrist.

Knuckles was next, finding Sonic trailing after him, pressing his forehead against his brother's back as Tom struggled to open the door, and then even Ozzie wasn't safe as Sonic jogged with him down the walk, scratching his back absentmindedly, eyes far off.

"He'll be alright, won't he?" Tails asked Tom quietly, watching Sonic lean against Maddie's legs.

"Yeah," Tom said back. And then, even quieter (because it had been a day, and it didn't feel right to leave any of his kids feeling worn through) he added, "Your brother just needs to be close to everyone when big things happen. He puts on a front, but we all know he's just a big toasted marshmallow past those quills." He winked. "Don't tell him I said that."

Tails managed a shaky smile. "Won't. Promise."

Tails and Knuckles knew already, anyway.

Maddie and Tom though - they knew better than anyone else, and when Tom went upstairs to change for bed that night he found Maddie dragging the spare pillows out of the guest room and onto their bed and gave her a knowing grin.

"Expecting company?"

"Do you even need to ask?"

It was like clockwork, really, when Sonic showed up timidly at their bedroom door, already dressed in one of Tom's shirts.

"Um…" he said, bare feet tapping on the hardwood. "Uh, can- do you think I could-"

Tom lifted the blankets.

Tails and Knuckles weren't far behind. The two of them would follow Sonic to the ends of the Earth, but usually just wound up trailing after him into their parents' bed.

Tom put the TV on, finding a hockey game while Maddie occupied herself with a paperback. Or tried to anyway.

Not much for hockey, Sonic draped himself over her shoulder, skimming the pages.

"How come everybody's always so tingly in these books, Mom?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

"Ew, no."

He sighed.

She turned the page.

"Oh he did *not* just say that," Sonic gasped.

Maddie rolled her eyes.

"What'a *dowry?* And why can't she wear pink to the ball? She'd look *great* in pink."

Maddie dragged in a less-than-patient breath.

"Why are his muscles *rippling?* Are they moving? Do my muscles ripple? Mom, feel my muscles. Do they ripple? Do Dad's? I bet they don't."

"Don't bring me into this," Tom said, eyes firmly on the TV.

"If I flex my pectorals in a certain way," Knuckles informed them all (though no one asked), "they appear to be dancing."

"Dad's *definitely* don't do that. I bet Keanu Reeves can do it, though. He's stronger than Dad."

"The Boulder is also stronger than Father."

"It's the Rock. And duh."

"Not loving this conversation," said Tom. In his lap, Tails patted his arm sympathetically.

"Don't worry, Dad," Sonic said, helpfully, head still on Maddie's shoulder. "Mom's strong enough for two. She likes'em weaker. Right Mom?"

"Hey!" Tails piped up from Tom's lap. "Dad's not *weak*."

"Thank you, *Tails*," said Tom.

“He’s *gangly* and *short*. Like a compact car! There’s lots of power in those!”

Tom dropped his head back against the headboard.

Sonic looked back over Maddie’s shoulder. “Ugh, why is she wearing *green?* That’s not her color. She should wear *blue*.”

Maddie’s next page turn was a little louder than it was meant to be.

“You know, for people who worry so much about their clothes, they sure do a lot of ‘tearing them asunder’... Wait- wait is that code for- oh *god!*”

“You could just watch the game, you know,” Maddie said, closing the book with her finger holding her place. “Or go grab a book of your own.”

He chose Option B, and was gone and back in a blink. “Now *this* is literature.”

“‘Minecraft: The Island’?”

“You just don’t understand ‘cause your taste has been skewed by all of *that*.” He waved a hand at her book. “This was written with *intent*.”

“And what exactly was the *intention?*”

“To slay monsters, Mom. Duh. No one’s choosing dress colors when everyone’s going around slaying monsters and rippling their muscles. *Much* cooler.”

“Oh really?”

He cleared his throat, flipping dramatically to a page. “Zombie flesh isn’t so bad,” he began.

“How is *my book* the gross one?”

“No one kisses when they’re eating zombies.”

She snorted. “Not true. They’ve got Mom’s watching out for them, making sure they don’t feed all their zombified vegetables to the dog and remember to brush their teeth.” She put her book down and quickly snatched Sonic close, forcefully nuzzling his cheek and pressing noisy kisses to his muzzle until Knuckles bemoaned that he couldn’t hear what the referee was saying over Sonic’s cries of *mom, stop, gross!*

The two of them quieted down, the other three boys in the king sized bed deep into whatever call the ref was making about a penalty from the right wing defense.

She tugged Sonic closer, ignoring his soft complaints. Not that any of them meant much when he was snuggling against her side, his head back on her shoulder. “You okay, Blueberry?”

“Mom,” he groaned. “You don’t have to call me that…”

“I *like* calling you that,” she said. “You’re *my* Blueberry.” She ran her hands through his quills, his heartbeat a drill against her arm, slowing with each careful movement as he practiced the deep, yoga breaths she’d shown him so many months ago. She picked up her book again, thinking that the conversation was over. Sometimes Sonic just needed the space, and she could give him that.

But then; “you can,” he whispered against her shoulder.

“What’s that, hon?”

“Call me your Blueberry, or whatever.” he said into her shoulder. “You can. If you want to.”

She nodded against the top of his head, dropping another steady kiss there. “I’m sorry she said all those things to you today.”

“S’okay.”

“It’s not.”

He hid his eyes against her arm, his breath coming out trembling into her side. “Mom?”

“Mmmhm?”

“We’re not- we’re not pets. Right?”

“Baby…”

“I mean, you- you buy us *flea medicine*-”

“We buy you what you need to keep you healthy, because you’re our boys.” She set her book aside, and brought her other arm around to hold him. “Simple as that. People like that… I don’t know, baby. I really don’t. Wish I knew what puts that kind of hate in people’s hearts…”

He swallowed. “So you didn’t- you didn’t get us - get *me* - because you couldn’t have-” he shifted in her arms, as if the question was crawling out of his skin. “If you could have your *own* kid-”

“You *are* my kids.” She squeezed him close. “Dad and I never actively *tried* to have kids, you know. It was always a, well, when we’re ready, we’ll see, sort of thing. And then you climbed in the garage window, and suddenly we knew we were ready. For *you*.”

“Oh…” He hid his face again and sniffled, peeking out to say, “glad I climbed in the garage window, then.”

“Oh baby, you have no idea.”

“… Love you, Mom.”

“Love *you*, Blueberry.”

She untangled a few of his quills. The hockey game was still going, the other three in the bed arguing softly over a bad call. Maddie reached over for her book but stopped herself and instead plucked Sonic's from where he'd dropped it between them. "Alright," she said. "Let's see how this literature holds up."

With an excited wiggle, he shrugged farther up onto her shoulder as she cracked to the first page. "I woke up underwater. *Deep* underwater…"

The game ended around the time they hit Chapter 4, and as Tom switched off the TV, Maddie put a bookmark between the pages to hold their place. "Gotta say, that's not bad."

"See?" Sonic said, then yawned. "Told you."

"Did everybody brush their teeth?" Tom asked, relieved at the murmurs of affirmation he got in return.

"And is anyone here going back to their own bed tonight?" Maddie asked. "Speak now or forever hold your peace."

None of the kids said a word.

Tom hit the light on his nightstand, Maddie hit hers. Late spring moonlight filtered in from half-closed blinds. The sounds of quiet shuffling filled the room as the family worked themselves into comfortable positions. Knuckles made an attempt to get over to Maddie's side, but when he found Sonic curled there tightly already, he retreated, settling over with Tom instead.

"Well this is a nice change of pace," Tom said, barely louder than a whisper.

Knuckles' attempt at a whisper was less successful. "It is actually fortunate that you do not have a physique like The Boulder or myself, or this would be much less comfortable."

"Love you too, bud."

Smack dab in the middle of everyone, Tails giggled. "Night everyone."

Through another yawn, Sonic said, "Happy Gotcha Day, Tails."

Knuckles reached out and drew the fox to the hollow of his shoulder. "Happy Day indeed, Brother."

Tails snuggled in close. "You're next," he said softly. "I just know it."

"We shall see," Knuckles replied gently.

The three boys, sandwiched between their parents, whispered back and forth, as if Maddie and Tom couldn't hear them. Though neither tried to stop the kids. They knew well enough the tenor of their voices, listening to the way their words shifted and dropped and stuttered. Maddie kept a steady rhythm of her fingers through Sonic's quills and Tom hummed a Jim

Croche song a little off key, drumming his fingers against Tails' shoulder, the notes rumbling against Knuckles' side.

Tails was the first to drop off. And then Knuckles.

Sonic had always been the most stubborn out of the three, and kept trying to keep his eyes open, asking questions that got slower and slower each time.

"Mom?"

"Mmmhm."

"D'you think we'll see Jojo over the summer?"

"Maybe."

"Hey, Mom?"

"Yeah, honey?"

"Can you read more to me tomorrow?"

"Course I can."

"Hey… Mom?"

"Mmm?"

"You promise we're not pets?"

"Sweetheart."

"Or- or you… you promise you don't want your own- your own baby?"

"*You're* my baby."

"… really?"

"Really."

"Okay… Hey, Mom?"

"Yeah, Baby?"

"D'ya… d'ya think Knuckles'll be… be 'dopted?"

"I hope so."

"Me too… Hey- hey mom?"

"I… um…"

“Yeah, honey?”

“I… could we…?”

She dragged her fingers slowly between his eyes up the slope of his muzzle, over and over.

“Could we…” he tried again, slurring.

“Mmmhm?”

“For… for summer… could we…”

“Go to sleep, hon.”

“M’not… not tired.”

“You are.”

“M’not… I mean… um… hey-hey mom?” He blinked slowly. “Glad you’re… glad you’re my…”

“Glad you’re *my* , too” she parroted softly, fingers still practicing their careful movement between his eyes. “Now shhh.”

“But… but Mom… M’glad… m’glad that…”

Whatever he said was gone moments later, his breathing the last to drop off and steady, heartbeat settling into a slow thrum.

“And then there were two,” Tom said into the dark.

Maddie laughed as quietly as she could, her hand still moving against Sonic’s forehead. Despite the coarse texture of his quills, his fur was feathery soft and still smelled like shampoo from the day before.

“Hey Mads?”

“Not you, too.”

Tom chuckled, shifting to rearrange Tails and Knuckles beside him.

“Just thinkin’, that’s all.”

“About what?”

“About today.”

Maddie let out a long breath, dipping down to press her face against Sonic’s forehead, breathing in the scent of grass and chocolate shakes and strawberry soap. “Yeah,” she murmured against the top of his head. “It was… a lot.”

“The good, the bad, and the ugly.”

“The *very* ugly.” She paused. “I can’t believe you used to *date* her.”

“It was *one* date.”

“That seems like too many.”

He laughed again. “Definitely too many.”

“Thank god you got your head screwed on straight. Don’t know what I’d do if you were the new *Mr. Sterling*.”

“Ew. Don’t even joke about that.” He paused when Tails shifted, the both of them staying quiet until their youngest’s breath evened out again. “Can’t believe he came at you like that.”

“Can’t believe Knuckles broke his hand.”

“To be fair, it was great to watch.”

“Oh, absolutely. He deserved it.”

Sonic rolled over in his sleep, muttering something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like *didn’t give Ozzie my carrots*. She huffed, scratching gently behind his ears, humming at the sound of the soft purr from somewhere inside his chest. “I hate that they had to hear what she said.”

Tom caught her eye through the dark. “There are people in the world like that. This won’t be the last time.”

She knew. Maddie knew better than Tom ever could, and they’d talked about it often after news broadcasts showed clips that left them clinging to one another.

“But hey…” He dragged her attention back, smiling as best as he could. “He spoke up.”

“He did.” Despite it all, she smiled back. “We’re raising some pretty sweet kids.”

“Sweet and brave.”

“The sweetest and the bravest.”

Sonic shifted again, eyes blinking open to mutter, “m’tough… not sweet…”

“You’re both. Like a jawbreaker,” Maddie whispered, pressing her nose against his. “Go back to sleep.”

“… kay…”

He drifted again, and Tom and Maddie waited a moment before looking at one another again.

“*And* we’ve got another one in for the books as far as adoptions go.” Tom said, glancing down to a snoring Knuckles who was clutching Tails to his chest.

“We do.” She nodded, chin bumping lightly against the top of her son’s head. “Two down. One to go.” Looking over at her eldest, she did her best to reach across the bed to touch his shoulder, fingers just skimming. “Tom. I’m- I’m afraid that they won’t let us… that we won't be able to… I mean what if- what if we can’t-” The words wouldn’t come out, but they still hung between them.

What if they won’t let us adopt him?

Tom grabbed her hand before she could pull it away. “I know,” he said. “Me too. But-”

“But?”

“But he’s still ours.” He squeezed her fingers. “Defended his family today and broke a man’s hand over his Mom’s honor and everything. I’d say that means we’re on the right track no matter what G.U.N. says.”

It had been a day full of nothing but the biggest highs and lows, but Tom still had a point. Knuckles had charged through the storm and came out the same as he’d left it; with their family name emblazoned on his mind. They’d stand for him, just as he had for them without a second thought.

It was what Wachowskis always tended to do, after all.

They whispered over the kids’ heads about summer vacation plans and Maddie begged Tom to make sure he updated them on the status of the broken-handed Mr. Sterling and the 16-Year-Old-Declared Harlot of Mrs. Sterling after he went to work on Monday. And eventually, much like the three nestled between them, they’d eventually tapered off until they, too, drifted off to sleep.

Family Meeting

Chapter Summary

In which a Family Meeting is called, and no one is in trouble.

"Family meeting!"

Sonic did his best to ignore the shout from the bottom of the open ladder, flipping through the book he and Maddie had been reading together from the top bunk. Below him, Tails looked over the edge of the bottom bunk where he'd been systematically organizing and reorganizing his Pokemon cards.

"Um. Sonic?"

"Mmmmhm?"

"I think Dad said there was a family meeting."

"Yup." Sonic popped the p at the end, flipping to the next page.

"Um. So. We should go. Right?"

"Nope," he said, popping the p again.

"Sonic-"

The hedgehog rolled his eyes. "Whenever Mom or Dad say *family meeting* it usually means they want to talk about something I did. Which means if I *ignore it*, then they can't figure out the *rest* of the stuff I might have definitely not done."

"That… doesn't sound like it works."

"20% of the time it does."

"Where did you even get that number from?"

"Don't worry about it. Tons and *tons* of research. Point is, I'm taking that chance." Especially since he'd been so certain that neither one of his parents had noticed the skateboard skid marks that had mysteriously appeared on their dining room baseboards. "Once I even got Maddie a bunch of *roses* after I snuck out. Gave me an extra *two days* to avoid any sort of talk. Trust me. The best way to solve a problem is to *ignore it completely*."

"I don't think that's true."

“Tails, I’m *fifteen*. You haven’t had the *experience* I have to figure out the ways of the world yet. Give it time.”

“Brothers!” Knuckles appeared. “Father has called for a summit and you are tardy. Come downstairs or I shall be forced to escort you.”

Tails hopped up.”I was already coming down!”

“Wise choice.” Knuckles climbed up into the room and let Tails go past him down the ladder. “Do not make me carry you, Sonic.”

“Please.” The hedgehog rolled his eyes. “As if you’d actually- *hey!* ”

“I have acquired your wayward son for you, Father,” Knuckles said, a squirming hedgehog over one shoulder.

“Put me *down*, Knucklehead! This is humiliating!”

“You have no one to blame but yourself, Brother.”

“Who are you calling *wayward!”* Sonic reared back his leg to kick Knuckles, but was dropped before that could happen, scrambling onto his feet to cross his arms and look at his parents, who were watching the exchange with barely restrained smiles. “Okay. Come on. Let’s get this over with. What did I do this time?”

“Sonic, honey, actually-”

“Listen, I’m sorry about the skateboard skids, okay? I’m sure they’ll come off with a little elbow grease and paint!”

“No, sweetheart, we’re-” Maddie blinked. “I’m sorry. What skidmarks?”

“What- *oh!*” Sonic’s smile was all teeth, batting his eyes as innocently as he could manage. “Nothing. No. Forget what I said!”

“Definitely not doing that,” said Tom. “And we’ll have *that* little talk later. But until then-” he pointed at the couch, “we need you three ready and alert for a vote.”

“Is this about who is the favorite child?” Knuckles clambered up on the far right side, Tails settling beside him. “If that is the case, I thought we had already decided it was me.”

“No, Knuckles.”

“Ah. Good. I knew my place was secure.”

“That’s not-” Tom pinched the bridge of his nose. “Mads, you wanna take this one?”

Maddie gave her husband a sympathetic look before clapping her hands together, getting her kids’ attention. “Dad and I talked with your Aunt Rachel and we thought that having some

sort of a summer get together would be a great idea."

"Oh *cool!"*

"Indeed!" Knuckles punched the air. "It is *very* cold, indeed!"

Tails looked between his parents before asking, "Are they coming here?"

"Actually, that's what we wanted to talk to you three about. Tom, you wanna cue it up?"

Tom flicked on the television, mirroring his phone to the screen, a nice addition that Tails had somehow figured out a few weeks ago.

"Right. So here's the deal," he said, pulling up his browser tabs. "We looked through and found *three places* we thought you guys might like."

"Is one of the choices Disneyland?" Sonic asked. "Because if one of the choices isn't Disneyland-"

"Disney's a smidge out of our budget for now," Maddie told him. "And we were thinking something a little quieter, a little more secluded."

He rolled his eyes, but nodded. "Alright, whadda we got, Dad? Choices, hit me!"

Tom tapped the first tab. The header across the top read YELLOWSTONE AERIAL ADVENTURES, with a dynamic photo of teens zip-lining beneath. "Not Disney, but theme-park-esque," he said, "Plus the national park's right there. Go see where the buffalo roam."

"Technically they're *bison*, Dad," Tails said. "Buffalo are native to the European continent."

"Technically you're a nerd," said Sonic. "And you're native to *annoying me*."

"That doesn't even make sense!"

"Boys!" Maddie clapped her hands, dragging them back with a look. "Can we get through *one* family meeting without trying to bring the house down?"

There was a muttered reply of *sorry mom*, and the two boys settled back with whispers of *dork* and *amoeba*.

Maddie rolled her eyes. "*Choice one*, as we were saying; it's a theme park. Plenty of outdoor obstacle courses. Lots to do to make sure you get *tired* and don't spend the entire time snapping at one another."

"I can fly already," Tails pointed out. "Doing it strapped to a wire isn't nearly as fun."

"And we already tried that, remember? With the jump ropes on the roo-" he caught his dad's eye. "With the jump ropes tied at a *safe and parentally advised height* near the ground."

“That is patently untrue,” said Knuckles, looking curiously over at Sonic. “Don’t you remember? You promised to pay me twenty dollars if I popped your shoulder back in. You still have not paid me.”

Maddie looked at her son’s, eyes cold. “ *Sonic*. I *swear*-”

“Do not be angry at him for his impressive feats, Mother. Be angry that he still has not given me what I am owed. I can still *unpop* your shoulder.”

“*I told you, I’m good for it.*”

“Then *produce your bounty*.”

“Option Number Two!” Tom declared loudly, drawing their attention back to the TV. A new photo of a dynamically curved dessert cave appeared on the screen. “Antler Canyon in Arizona.”

“Ooooh,” Tails sat up straighter in his seat. “The canyons back on my planet were *filled* with tech from the Ancients! I’d go scavenging all the-”

“‘Fraid there’s no alien tech in these caves,” Tom said, looking mildly disappointed as he said it.

Tails, ever the optimist, bounced on the couch cushion. “I bet we could find some *really* neat stuff if we dug!”

There was a chatter of excitement between the three boys before Maddie stepped in. “No one’s digging through Antler Canyons.”

“Why!”

“Because you’re not allowed.”

Tails’ eyes narrowed. “So… we’ll climb them?”

“You can’t climb them, either.”

“Okay, but what if-”

“We’re just *walking*,” said Maddie. “It’s a big hiking spot. But it’s thousands of years old and *full* of history-”

“*Booooring* .

Sonic flopped onto his side on the couch. “I don’t understand this! How did I end up in a family full of *losers!?”*

“I am in this family as well, Brother.”

“I said what I said.”

Tom pinched the bridge of his nose. “Fine. Here’s what we’re gonna do. Either we pick out of the three, or Mom and I are flipping a coin for whatever *we* choose.”

“If the third choice is a science convention-”

“Or perhaps the WWE Summer Slam in the Lost Vegas!” Knuckles interjected.

“*Yes!”* Sonic bared his teeth, flexing his twiggish arms. “Oh, we’d *dominate* the ring. Can we go there, Mom? I bet Knuckles and I could make some money, too. You could say you’re betting on your kids, and they’d go *easy* on us. We’d clean the place out!”

“We’re not *scamming wrestlers* on our family vacation,” Maddie scrubbed her face. “Tom, can you just…”

Tom clicked to the next slide.

It was not the WWE or a science convention.

But when the boys didn’t immediately start up the peanut gallery, they were at least hesitantly optimistic.

“Your Mom found it and thought it might be a good way to spend a week during Summer.”

On the television screen sat a photo of a pale yellow farmhouse, fronted by a screened-in porch, and surrounded by flowers of every shape and color. He tapped his phone and scrolled through more shots: the inside of the porch, with a swinging daybed, a kitchen that was somehow both old-fashioned and top-of-the-line, a living room with the world’s biggest sectional sofa, a bedroom with not one but two sets of bunk beds, and a backyard with not only a firepit, but a resident goat as well.

“Where is it?” Tails wanted to know.

“Boulder, in Colorado,” Maddie answered. “So a little closer of a drive for Rachel and Jojo.”

“And it’ll have enough beds for Grandma Rosie and Grandpa T to come.”

“They’re coming!” Sonic sat up again.

“Mmmhm. They couldn’t come to the other two - they’re not much for hiking anymore, and you couldn’t pay them to zipline - so we told them we’d let them know when you decided.”

“And we’d have the *whole place* to ourselves?”

“Completely by ourselves,” Maddie said, taking the phone from Tom. “There are hiking trails, but they’re not too long-”

“Is there a TV?” Sonic zipped forward until he was standing on the coffee table, looking down at the phone over Maddie’s shoulder. “Can we bring our video games?”

“You can bring *one* video game system. We’re not lugging the entire house with us.”

“Does that horned animal reside on the premises?” Knuckles wanted to know.

“Yup,” Tom said, scrolling to a closer shot of the animal. “That there is Michael Jordan - ‘cause he’s the G.O.A.T., get it?”

“We know you love puns, Dad.” Tails rolled his eyes, but he was grinning.

“And… do we get to meet Michael the Goat?”

“You can,” said Maddie. “And we can do yoga with him.”

“He will not be better than *me*.”

“No, honey. I don’t think he’ll actually be doing any of the yoga. But he’ll be around to watch.”

Knuckles nodded. “I welcome an adoring audience.”

Sonic rocked back and forth on his heels. “How long do we get to stay?”

“A week, bud.”

“A *whole week*? With Jojo and Aunt Rachel and Grandma and Grandpa?”

“Yup.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Is there a catch? Are you gonna make me clean out the goat pen like on the farm?”

“No,” Tom laughed. “It’s not like on the farm. You just get to relax. Bring a book. Hang ten.”

“Hang *what?”*

“It’s- nevermind. But it’ll be a whole week of *this*.” He flipped through the pictures again; of the wildflowers, Michael in his pen, the family room, the grill sitting outside, waiting for hamburgers, the fire pit in the yard, a strategic bag of marshmallows waiting just by the side. “No summer work. No chores. Just *this*.”

Sonic raised his hand.

Tom rolled his eyes. “Yes, Sonic?”

“Can the jury deliberate on this a sec?”

“Sonic-”

“Respect the system, Dad!”

Tom snorted. “Fine. Go… deliberate.”

He zipped over to the couch, the boys forming a tight huddle. “Soooooooo… thoughts? Opinions? Any too-good-to-be-true red flags?”

“I don’t think so,” Tails shrugged. “I think it looks nice.”

“I very much would like to meet Michael the Goat,” Knuckles said. “Also, the bit about ‘no chores’ has me intrigued.”

“Yeah, but what if we get there and they decide to put us to work? What if we’re sleeping with the *goat*?”

“I would not mind sharing my space with Michael.”

“We can hear you!” Tom had his arms spread out, Maddie trying very hard not to let the laughter in her chest slip out. “We never *put you to work!*”

“Father, this is a *sacred circle*. And you put me to work *all the time*.”

“Your job is to *empty the dishwasher*.”

“You see? I’m basically a *serf*. Now turn around and stop listening.”

“You’re being too loud!”

“Then cover your ears!” He turned around again. “Okay, so it feels like we’ve come to a decision.”

“I think so!” Tails peeked over the huddle. “I like the bunk beds. And it’ll be cool to see a new state! I never get to travel.”

“We went to *Siberia*.”

“I was knocked out for half of it.”

“Fair point.” Sonic gave Knuckles a look. His elder brother nodded, and Sonic spun around. “Mother, Father, we’ve come to a decision. It was a difficult one. Full of pain and arguing. And I know it might come as a surprise-”

“We could *hear you*, Sonic.”

“Father, *please* keep your comments to the *end* of the closing arguments?”

Tom hid a smile behind his phone. “Sorry. Please, go on.”

“After *much* deliberation, we’ve decided to go with door number *three*, as long as the terms and conditions of *no chores* still stand.”

“You’ll still need to help clean up after dinner.”

“You’re *killing me* here, Dad.”

Tom rolled his eyes, but the smile stayed firm. “So number three, then?”

There was a collective cheer of *yes* and *please* and *I can’t wait* from the kids. Sonic’s grin lost its sardonic twist and soon enough he was bouncing around the living room with the other two, clinging to his parents' knees with little declarations of “*thanks for being the best Mom and Dad ever!”*

Tom and Maddie clung right back, just as excited as the rest of their little pack, and soon enough they were all on the couch, squished between both sides and not caring about much else but the people between them and the picture of the farmhouse on the TV.

“We were hoping you guys would choose this one,” Maddie confessed after the excitement wore down. “That porch swing called to me. I’ve got books I need to finish, and a week of sitting back and doing *nothing?”* She spread out her fingers, arms raised out from her twisted position between Knuckles and Tom. “It sounds like we all need to take a breath after *everything* .”

Tom nodded, leaning back against his wife. “Oh, it’ll be great. We’ll do s’mores by the fire pit, and movie nights, and- Oh! We can go swimming *every day*.”

As if someone had bumped the record player of the moment, Sonic froze on Tom’s other side. “Swimming…?”

“Mmhmm,” Maddie said brightly. “The house is *minutes* away from the Boulder Reservoir, which has a huge stretch of beaches and you can rent boats, or paddle boards or-”

Knuckles demanded to know what a paddle board was, and as Maddie explained, Sonic hunched forward, elbows on his knees. “Oh… great.”

Twelve Hours on the Road

Chapter Summary

It's time for a Wachowski Family Roadtrip!

The end of school came and went too quickly for Sonic to worry much about a vacation until it was right on top of them; when Maddie and Tom were calling up the stairs to one another, reminding each other to wash towels and pack sunscreen, and Tom was micromanaging the packing process.

“It’s just one week,” Tails remarked as he checked and rechecked his toolkit to be sure it was in order. “If we forget something, we can always just have it again when we get home, right?”

“Wrong,” Sonic told him, scooping out the contents of his sock drawer and dumping it into his suitcase. “If we forget something, it means we have to make an emergency trip to whatever weird grocery store they have in Colorado. Or *worse*, we have to hear Mom or Dad complain all week about how they can’t believe they forgot, I dunno, Dad’s razor or whatever.”

Tails paused halfway through zipping up the kit. “Dad would look really weird with a beard. Also, couldn’t you just… run home and get what we forgot?”

Sonic, arms now full of comic books that were absolutely essential, blinked. “I mean, yeah, but that’s *work*. It’s not like *I’m* the one who’s gonna forget something.”

Tails shrugged. “Still seems like a lot of stress for something that’s supposed to be relaxing.”

“One day you’ll understand.” Sonic dumped the comic books into his backpack, right next to the rubber band ball. “Vacations for grownups mean that you stress in *new places*. It’s the way the world works.”

“That’s dumb.”

“*You’re* dumb.”

“More packing, less insulting,” they heard their Mom call up the stairs.

“Speaking of packing,” Sonic grabbed his signed minor league baseball, shoving it into the top. “Someones gotta go down and make sure that they regulate Dad’s shirts. I am *not* sharing the same house with Jimmy Buffet.”

“You can’t stop me!” Tom yelled up the steps. “I’m living on *island time*.”

“We’re going to *Colorado!”* Sonic hollered back. “There’s no islands!”

“Margaritaville, then.”

“I’m unadopting myself.”

Tom’s voice warbled in song when he belted out; “It's only half past twelve but I don't care-”

“Don’t you *dare*-”

“*It's 5 o'clock somewhere!”*

“Ugh! I regret *everything!*” Sonic fell face first into his beanbag chair. “When I switch out his shirts, you can’t say *anything*.”

“Don’t drag me into your mess.”

Sonic gave his younger brother a harrowing look. “I liked it better when you didn’t talk back.”

“At a moment like this I can't help but wonder,” Tails sang, “What would Jimmy Buffett do?”

“*Mom!*” Sonic shrieked. “*Mom!The bodysnatchers got Tails! He’s even dorkier than before!”*

“S’my’boy!” Tom yelled right back. “Embrace the Kitsch!”

Sonic rooted around in his backpack, unloading all of the piled up junk, to find his headphones just as Tom and Tails burst into the loudest singing match Green Hills might have ever heard. Unfortunately, those headphones ended up being dead, and so Sonic did his best to drown out terrible off key renditions of Cheeseburger in Paradise and cursed the name of Jimmy Buffet and his terrible taste in shirts.

It only took so long before their front door was surrounded by duffel bags full of swim trunks and sunscreen and awful, terrible, horrible shirts that Sonic couldn’t wrench away from his father no matter how many times he hid them in the oven, hoping that maybe, just maybe, someone might crank up the heat and send them to where they belonged.

Ozzie was on his last walk before the first part of the drive, and the boys were running around the house under their Mother’s instructions to look for whatever they might have forgotten.

“Absolutely not,” Maddie said, over and over, as each child came down with something they swore was *absolutely necessary for setting a vacation vibe.*

“But Mother!” Knuckles was aghast, clutching his punching dummy close. “I need him. How will I practice defending your honor if *Simon Basset* is not by my side.”

“First of all, *hate* that you named him that-”

“You spoke of Dukes on the phone with your female friends. He sounds like an irreputable man!”

“He’s- he’s a character, honey.”

“*No excuses*.”

“And I’m afraid that Simon Basset is a little too… muscular to fit in the back of our car.”

“He is *not* as muscular as I am, and I fit in the car just fine!”

“Yeah, but I’m not taking two of you, and- *Tails, drop the reactor*.”

“But Mom! I need it to-”

“I am not traveling with nuclear waste!”

“But I zip locked it twice!”

“Tails, I’m not having this- *Sonic. What’s behind your back?*”

Sonic batted his eyes as innocently as he could muster and slowly pulled his father’s stetson from behind his back.

Maddie’s brow rose.

“I just think,” Sonic reasoned, still batting away, “if my darling Father is going to go with the Dorky Dad Vibe, he’s got to really *commit*.”

She gave the stetson a look, and then nodded. “Approved. Throw it in. But hey!” He paused, turning around. “Put it *behind* the cooler so your Dad doesn’t see. Don’t need him wriggling out of this one, do we.”

Sonic grinned and went to hide the hat somewhere his Dad could never find it. God forbid Tom did, Sonic was sure it would find a new home out the driver side window.

There were final bathroom stops, and more rounds through the house to check on the stove and the lights, and calls were made to Tom’s parents to make sure they were just as ready as the rest of them, and it was just before noon when the Wachowski clan loaded themselves up into the car and began the drive.

Which Sonic had, unfortunately, underestimated timing wise.

Just by a little bit.

“How long is it gonna be?” Tails asked from the seat beside his brother, watching Maddie fiddle with the volume, connecting her phone and scrolling through the playlists she’d carefully crafted the night before (and already hated just hours later).

“It’s super fast,” Sonic answered for her, waving his brother off. “I’ve run that way before. I mean, I know they’re not as fast as me. I got there in like… twenty minutes? So, what? Multiply that by human slowness and you’ve got yourselves a solid hour?”

Maddie snorted. “Try again, hon.”

Sonic blinked. “Two hours?”

“Your math’s a little off.”

“... *three* hours?”

“Try twelve.”

“*Twelve hours?”*

“If there’s no traffic.”

“Which there probably will be,” said Tom over his shoulder, taking a right onto the main road. “*If* we don’t have to stop to let your parents rest.”

“Why can’t we just have Knuckles pull us!”

“Because your brother’s not a pack horse,” said Maddie. “So what kind of music are we feeling? Old time country or old time rock.”

“Whatever’ll make this go *faster*.”

“Jimmy Buffet it is!”

Whatever Sonic said next was drowned out by the sounds of Pencil Thin Mustache.

Hour one passed smoothly enough. They traveled through Montana, passing by mountain passes and lakes. Tom finally took some pity on his middle son and put on AC/DC, and the car was filled with the sounds of Angus Young shrieking *Highway to Hell*, the boys having a blast trying to match his voice.

Hour two was a little quieter, Maddie passing out trail mix and turning on the radio to listen to a local baseball game until they were out of range. Sonic looked up the scores, and bemoaned about the teams until Tails showed him a new invention he was fiddling with that apparently was *meant* to toast bread on command (something to make Knuckles’ life a little easier), the two of them very *quickly* hiding the burnt hole it created in the car seat with their arm when Maddie turned around.

Hour three came and went without much excitement, until Knuckles began to tell tales of how the car drive would help him to *hone his patience as a warrior*, and Sonic snapped back that he did that every day listening to Knuckles talk. Maddie and Tom shut down what *would* have become a brawl between the two brothers, but the tension in the air promised it was not the last of that, especially when Knuckles and Sonic began calling each other more and more

creative insults under their breath, Tom finally cutting in around the time Knuckles called Sonic a *broken electric blanket* and Sonic had shot back that his brother was a *stomachless milk bag*.

Hour four was deemed *Reading Hour*. Unfortunately, the only one who could read for more than a few minutes without getting carsick was Knuckles, and the book he'd packed was the one Maddie had gotten him about puberty.

And he liked to read aloud.

Reading Hour was canceled twenty minutes in just as Knuckles was beginning to categorize *tingly feelings*.

Hour five they passed over the border through Wyoming. Maddie and Tom made a big deal of it, stopping on the side of the road and lining the kids up in front of the huge *Welcome to Wyoming: Forever West* sign and texted the pictures to Tom's parents, who had landed an hour before and were just getting settled in the rental house.

"You boys look so sweet!"

Tails grinned, leaning towards the phone Maddie was holding out, their grandparents on speakerphone. "It was so cool seeing the sign, too. I wanted to see where the Rocky movie was made, but Mom said we didn't have time."

"Another trip then, Sweetness! Where are my other two love bugs?"

"They're in Nintendo World, Mom. Hey boys, say hi to Grandma."

There was a mumbling noise from the back of the car.

Rosie laughed.

"Sorry Rosie," Maddie said between her own laughter. "That might be the most you get out of them right now."

"That's alright, honey! I get it. I'm not as interesting as… oh shoot. What was that game you used to play when you were little, Tommy? The one about the little Canadian construction worker who fought the big dinosaur? Michael?"

From somewhere faintly in the background they heard Big T offer up, "No, wasn't it that French electrician? Marcel?"

Tails gave Tom a quizzical look and he laughed. "Mario, Mom, and he was *Italian*."

"That's the one!" Rosie chirped. "Well drive safe, y'all! We'll see you when you get here."

Hour six was dinnertime. They drove past three different local, mom-and-pop establishments because the sign on the highway said there was a SONIC and, well, how could they not? Burgers and shakes and a chance to stretch legs and let Ozzie out (as well as offering the dog

his own special dinner of two plain hamburger patties) helped reset everyone's mood and they were in better spirits as they got back on the road.

Hour seven and eight were dedicated to the three boys reciting the entire script of *The Avengers*. Tom and Maddie endured it, because they'd at least stopped fighting. Though when that ended and Sonic *tried* to begin reciting all of Speed, they very quickly shut it down before the first curse word could get dropped.

Hour eight they stopped to walk Ozzie again and use the rest-stop bathrooms to get ready for bed. "When will *you* sleep?" Tails asked around his toothbrush, another family double taking when they saw the animals at the sinks, one of the younger kids whispering something to their younger sister, tired eyes lighting up with some sort of awed recognition.

"Mom and I will take shifts if we have to," Tom answered, slipping the tiny travel toothpaste tube back into its bag. "But there should be less traffic this time of night, so maybe we'll get there before Mom or I feel tired."

"Speak for yourself," Maddie yawned, grabbing wet wipes to wash their faces down as best as she could.

Sonic leaned against Tom's legs, trying and failing to wiggle away from his Mom's hands, getting scrubbed down with the antibacterial wipe anyway. "I'm not tired," he said, trying to hide a yawn. "I'm so awake."

"Mmhm. Sure, bud."

"I am! I bet I could- *Mom, sto-ooo-op!"*

"It wouldn't take so long if you'd stop squirming!"

"Leave my ears alone!"

"You know what happens when we don't clean them out. Do you *want* an ear infection again?" His Mother's Veterinary Voice was breaking through the exhaustion.

"*Yes!* It was less embarrassing than- ouch!"

" It wouldn't hurt if you'd *stop moving!"*

Sonic tried and failed to pull away again just as Maddie finally got him into enough of a headlock to scrub out his left ear.

That was apparently the moment that the children and their mother, done scrubbing down at the sinks, approached the little family. The boy had a comic book in one hand and a marker in the other.

"Are you the guys that stopped the robot?"

Sonic, sensing a spotlight, finally escaped his mother's hold and struck a pose. "That's us! Blue Justice and Company!"

"Why don't we have cool names?" Tails spit out his toothpaste.

"Because you haven't come up with any."

"Oh." Tails pursed his lips. "I guess I'm Double Trouble?"

"Yes! Perfect!"

Tom rolled his eyes affectionately, casting a knowing look towards the other parents as he pointed to his two boys. "Their names are Sonic and Miles."

"Dad!"

"You're ruining our whole vibe!"

The boy apparently didn't care at all, and approached, flush with excitement. "Dude, I saw you fighting that robot on YouTube. I'm Asher, by the way, and this is Charlie."

His sister waved, speechlessly bouncing on her toes. The Avengers posed on her pajamas; her brother in sweatpants and a Batman t-shirt.

It was clear from their admiration that the boys in clan Wachowski were very much on the same rung.

“Thought you guys had your HQ in Montana,” Asher said. He leaned in conspiratorially, voice hushed. “You on, like, a *secret mission* or something?”

Sonic opened his mouth, but Knuckles answered first. “Only a mission for some much needed rest and recreation.”

“We’re going to something called a verbow,” Tails added. “With our grandparents and our cousin!”

Charlie put a small hand to her cheek. “You guys gots grandparents too??” She and her brother exchanged an excited look. “Just like *us!*” she whisper-shouted at him.

“That’s what *we’re* doing!” Asher told them. “Goin’ to Yellowstone. What about you guys?”

“Colorado,” Sonic said, eager to get back in the conversation. “We *almost* did Yellowstone! You doing that ziplining thing?”

Both human children squealed and looked up at their mother, who winced.

“There’s *ziplining??* ”

“I thought there were just buffaloes!”

“Technically bison,” Tails said, not that anyone was paying attention.

“I’m so sorry,” Maddie said to the other mother.

The woman laughed. “I mean, there were bound to be billboards on the way to the resort,” she shrugged. “We’ll see about the zipline thing. Depends on if we’ve got our listening ears on for the rest of the trip.”

Both human children mimed turning their ears on, then turned back to the Wachowskis. “Oh! Before we go, think we could get autographs?”

Tails looked up at Maddie. “You can,” she encouraged.

Sonic didn’t need to be told twice.

“I can’t believe you’re just like us.” Asher watched Sonic add a bunch of stars around his name before he passed it to Tails. “My friends at school kept saying that you probably only spoke in, like… Alien languages and ate nothing but space juice.”

“He’s too picky for space juice,” said Tom, helping Knuckles get the pen into his massive glove. At Sonic’s pleading look, he added, “What! It’s true!”

“I like chili dogs best. Even though Mom and Dad say I can’t have them all the time.”

“And you just fight crime? All day?”

Sonic scoffed. “I wish. Nah. We go to school and junk.”

“Just like us!” Charlie had grabbed onto her brother’s arm and tugged on it.

Asher took back his comic, hugging it tight to his chest. “My friends are *never* gonna believe this. Thanks, dude!”

“Oh, totally! Always good to meet a- *Mom!”*

Maddie apparently saw an opportunity, her middle child just distracted enough for her to finally pounce, cleaning out her son’s other ear.

“Mom, I’m talking to a fan!”

“That’s great, hon, but -*stop wiggling!*- you still need to get ready for bed.”

Sonic finally relented, but gave Asher a look. “Moms, right?”

The other boy grinned. “Moms,” he agreed.

They finally got everyone into the car, Maddie taking her spot behind the wheel to give Tom a much needed break. By hour nine, Sonic was continuing to say that he wasn’t tired, even as Tails drifted off beside him.

“You sure you don’t want to catch a few z’s, bud?” Tom had his own eyes closed, slumped down in the passenger seat. Maddie had loaded up her folk playlist, and James Taylor crooned about *Sweet Baby James* through the speakers.

“Nah. I’m not tired.”

“That is untrue.”

Sonic yelped, whipping around to look at a wide awake Knuckles staring at the front of the car. “I can hear your heartbeat. It is slower.”

“Dude, could you be any more creepy?”

“I am simply pointing out-”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. You’ve got some weird echidna superpowers or whatever.”

Knuckles grunted, still staring towards the front, unblinking.

“Whatever.” Sonic rolled his eyes, stubbornly keeping himself awake just to spite his older brother. But there was only so much he could do.

The ninth hour turned into the tenth.

Sonic tried counting trees, but they began to disappear into the pitch darkness outside, only illuminated by the steady beating of their headlights on the road. Leaning against the window didn’t help much. The rumbling of the engine through his (very clean) ears was steady and constant and he had to shake his head to keep his eyes from closing.

“I’m not going to sleep,” he announced, leaning back into his car seat, closing his eyes. “I’m just resting my eyes so I can stay awake *better*.”

“We did not ask.”

“Well, I’m *telling you*,” snapped Sonic, eyes still closed. They weren’t opening. Which was… concerning.

“Whatever you say, sweetheart.” Maddie turned the radio down until Willie Nelson was little more than a soft melody.

“M’super awake.”

“Mmmmhm.”

“M’gonna… stay awake… f’r’ver.”

“I believe it.”

There were a few beats of silence after that, Maddie waiting knowingly as the car fell quiet.

“He is asleep.”

Maddie looked into her rearview mirror, Knuckles’ eyes (glowing cat-like in the low light) meeting hers. “You’re not tired?”

Her eldest shook his head. “I will rest when we have safely reached our destination.”

“It’s really ok,” she assured him. “Even Dad’s asleep.”

“It is well established that I have more fortitude than Father.”

She bit back a laugh, lest she disturb her sleeping husband. “You know it’s not your job to protect us, right?”

“I know it is not my job.”

“Good, because-”

“It is my privilege,” he said. “and my honor, to watch over my family.”

She caught his eye in the rearview again, just briefly. “You really are my best boy, you know that?”

In the mirror, in the pale glow of the rising moon, his muzzle flushed.

“Love you, baby.”

“And I, you,” he said quietly. He shifted in his seat, folding his arms across his chest. “Perhaps I will also… rest my eyes.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

And before they hit hour ten, she heard his low, soft snoring join the others.

Family Vacation Part 1 - Settling In

Chapter Summary

In which the Wachowskis get adjusted to their vacation digs.

Hour twelve had them finally, at long last, rolling up the driveway of the farmhouse.

The porchlight was on, and even though it was past midnight, Big T was up and waiting for them. He tapped lightly on the passenger side window and woke Tom, the three adults exchanging whispered greetings as they carried the younger two children into the house. Then Maddie gently roused Knuckles (who was too heavy to carry), and coaxed him inside.

Rosie was woken up by the rustling downstairs, appearing at the foot of the stairs in slippers and a robe.

There were more hushed greetings as Tom and Maddie tucked their youngest two kids into one of the bunk beds, Knuckles climbing into the bottom of the opposite bed, flopping into the mattress and snoring as soon as his head was against the pillow.

Maddie and Tom decided that the suitcases could wait (save for the cooler, which was brought inside, the Master Emerald tucked safely beside the brioche buns Tom had picked up from the fancy supermarket beside the Green Hills library) and ended up passing out in their own bedroom.

“Wasn’t too bad,” croaked Tom.

Maddie hummed beside him, not even bothering to change out of her clothes. “Seven days of doing nothing.”

“Sounds incredible.”

“It’ll make the twelve hours back a little more bearable.”

Whatever Tom said dropped off, the room going silent as their breathing slowed, the farmhouse settling around them.

Despite the long drive and strange sleep schedule, the boys were up before any of the adults, exploring the farmhouse until their clanging and excited shouts roused the rest of the house.

“*Finally!* ” Sonic saw their Dad first, zipping up to him. Tails had his head stuck in the fusebox, poking around at the old wiring, and Knuckles was at the window, in a staring

contest with the goat outside. “This place is *so cool!* Did you see the barn out back? It’s smaller than Grandma and Grandpa’s, and it just has *goats* there!”

“There are three of them,” intoned Knuckles, still staring. “I have not yet introduced myself to any of their tribe.”

“Sure there’ll be time for that *after* coffee,” Tom said, shuffling his way to the kitchen.

His father was already there, with sausages on the stove, offering him a cup.

“There booze in this?” Tom asked.

“Just coffee this morning,” Big T chuckled. “Figured we’d save the whiskey for later, to go along with those.” He jerked a thumb at the kitchen table and Tom followed the gesture, finding a cigar box sitting next to the fruit bowl.

Tom took his mug and sat down at the table, leaning towards the box. “Oh man, can’t decide which of these is more enticing.”

“Oh lord,” Maddie sighed as she came through the doorway. “Not the Once A Year Cigars.”

“What better time?” Tom said, grinning at her as she came up behind him, rubbing his shoulders.

“*Not* in the house, alright?”

“Of course.” He took hold of one of her hands, kissed the knuckles.

“The Once A Year What Now?” Sonic asked, zipping to the table.

“And *not* around the kids,” she added.

Big T took that moment to replace the cigar box with a plate of sausages and Sonic forgot to be curious.

Rosie entered the kitchen through the back door with fresh eggs in a basket and breakfast was officially underway.

Rachel and Jojo weren’t set to arrive until the late morning, promising to call when they were ready to have Tom pick them up from the tiny nearby airport.

That meant there was at least a few hours to explore all together before the house became even louder. After breakfast, there was a walk around the fields and into the surrounding woods. The mountains were bigger than the ones in Montana, and the boys marveled at the way they could zip about, exploring caves and peaks.

The goats on the farm were somewhat of a main attraction, accepting handfuls of goat feed from each of the boys except for Knuckles.

“I do not trust them,” he told Maddie. “Their eyes are *strange*.”

Michael stared at Knuckles from beyond the fence. Knuckles stared back.

“They're just goats, honey. They’re not gonna do anything.”

“That could be a part of their ruse. They are here to-” Knuckles jumped back with a yelp when one of the goats took the opportunity to let out a screaming bleat.

Just before lunchtime, Jojo and Rachel finally landed and Tom went to pick them up while Rosie wrangled the boys into the kitchen to help her prep for sandwiches.

“You sure this is *all* you want?” Rosie raised a brow at Sonic.

“Grandma, you can’t improve on perfection.”

She blinked, looking down at the plain white bread that he’d used to bookmark a stack of plain turkey. “You sure you don’t want any… mustard or pickles or-”

“Don’t even try it, Rosie,” said Maddie from the couch, book open on her lap. “We’ve been trying to get him to mix and match food for months.”

“But he eats *chili dogs!”*

“Because they come like that,” said Sonic, cutting his sandwich at a diagonal. “And it’s just meat with more meat. There’s no vegetables or any of that junk.”

“Of course there-”

Rosie went quiet when Maddie furiously began to shake her head.

“I mean- yeah. Course. None of that stuff in chili.”

Satisfied, Sonic began to oversee his brothers’ sandwich making, criticizing their excessive use of condiments.

“Thanks,” Maddie whispered. “Mixing vegetables into stuff is usually the only way we can get him to eat them.”

“Oh, honey. Tom was the same way. He’ll grow out of it.”

“I hope so,” Maddie murmured, looking over towards Sonic. “It’s only a matter of time before he realizes what we’re doing. There’s only so long I can tell him that the ground up broccoli in our pasta sauce isn’t just some foreign kind of beef. I already feel bad enough about lying.”

“Lying’s half of raising kids,” said Rosie, sympathetically patting Maddie’s hand. “I just used to call it creative problem solving.”

“Grandma!” Sonic called from the table, staring down at his sandwich, horrified. “Grandma, there was *lettuce stuck in here*.”

“You must eat your vegetables, brother!”

“Are you *trying* to poison me!?”

“I am *trying* to *strengthen* you!”

“Lettuce doesn’t even *taste* like anything,” Tails said, his own sandwich piled high with greens.

“Why would I waste my time with something that has no taste?” Sonic countered.

“You *need* fiber in your diet,” Knuckles told him. “It is no wonder you are so irregular.”

“*Oh my **god*** stop talking! Right now!”

“The book Mother gave me includes a chapter on proper nutrition-”

“I don’t care what your dumb hormone book says!”

“You will regret that when your body begins to change and you are unprepared-”

“Stop. Talking. *Moooooooom*, make him stop!”

Maddie hid her face in her hands so they wouldn’t see how mightily she was struggling to hold in her laughter. “Just eat your lunch,” she managed.

The afternoon was so chock-full of unpacking and showing Jojo everything they’d discovered over the course of the morning that there wasn’t time for bickering. The grown-ups debated going out to dinner, but the kids were still going full-throttle by 6 PM that they opted to order pizza instead, and figure out how the various remotes worked to get a movie playing.

“We’ll do the lake tomorrow,” Maddie said, at the dining table with a half-eaten slice and a glass of red wine in front of her. “Get ‘em good and tired out, so they’ll sit still for a meal out.”

“Solid plan,” Rachel agreed. “It’ll be nice to let them swim in a body of water *without* a riptide to worry about.”

On the couch, greasy paper plate in his lap, Sonic’s ears swiveled away from LEGO Batman on the TV, honing in on the adults’ conversation.

“Oh it’ll be *great*,” Tom was saying. “And there’s so much to *do* on the water. We should pack the cooler, just spend the whole day. Weather’s gonna be good, right?”

Rosie nodded. “S’what the man on TV said this morning. The whole week’s gonna be *gorgeous*. ‘Cept maybe Thursday - the heat’s got ‘em warnin’ ‘bout storms.”

“Good thing you brought their game system,” Big T said, his pizza slice folded perfectly in one hand. “Don’t imagine your boys are much for jigsaw puzzles.”

“No, not much,” Maddie said. “I did see a cabinet full of board games, though.”

“Oh lord, you really wanna get those kids going with a round of Monopoly?” Rachel asked over her own wine glass.

“The house might not survive,” Tom said.

“If and when we need to, we’ll figure something out,” Maddie said, then she leaned on the back of her chair, craning to see the kids on the couch. “Everybody good? Need any seconds? Nobody getting grease on the couch, right?”

She got a chorus of *we’re good*s in answer.

Rachel was watching her as she turned back. “Any news?” she asked quietly.

“Hmm?”

The elder sister nodded towards the living room. “Any news?”

“Oh! Oh, um, no,” Maddie said, voice lowered dramatically. “Nothing.”

“It was always a long shot,” Tom sighed.

“Maybe no news is good news?” Rosie offered hopefully. “You know how slow things move in the bureaucracy.”

“We told Wade to keep an eye on the mail,” Tom said.

His father fixed him with a pointed look. “But you’re not expectin’ anything.”

“Just trying to temper our expectations, Dad.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for bein’ realistic.” Tom Sr. said. He took a sip of his beer. “But I don’t think it’s time to throw in the towel just yet.”

“We’re not,” Maddie said quickly. “Just… bracing ourselves, I guess.”

Bit T nodded slowly. “Still,” he said, before taking another swig of beer.

“Did you at least tell Wade to call you if he saw anything?” Rachel asked, tearing apart her pizza crust.

"Yeah. We told him what it would look like so we don't get a call every time a bed bath and beyond coupon comes in."

"It's just so-" Maddie began, but Tom quickly grabbed her hand. She looked at him curiously, and he pointed over towards the living room.

Sonic's eyes were on the screen, but his ears were still twitching, swiveling towards the dining room at all possible angles. At their silence, they flickered upwards, hopeful that maybe their whispers had just gotten quieter.

Big T and Rosie seemed to understand better than Rachel did, but she knew well enough that their silence was *Something To Do With Alien Kids* and followed along.

"I wonder what Minor Leagues they've got out here," Tom said, shifting the conversation at a rapid 180. "Think we could catch a game or two?"

Rosie hid a stiff smile behind her hand. "Oh, I'm sure you can manage to catch the scores on your phone."

"I don't know about you," said Maddie, "but I plan on spending this entire vacation doing as little as possible."

There was a resounding murmur of agreement, and Sonic took that moment to get up from the couch, wandering with purposeful aimlessness into the kitchen.

"Hey there, bud." Taking another swig of beer, the parents watched their son stand on his toes to see over the counter as best he could. “You need something.”

“Just… looking for a slice of pizza.”

“They’re right there.”

“Yup,” said Sonic, back to them, going through one of the boxes. “Yup yup yup…”

Maddie leaned her chin on the heel of her palm. “Are you gonna take one, or…?”

“Just lookin’. So many decisions. You know how it is.”

“Ahh yes, the age old philosophical debate of *cheese* versus *pepperoni*,” Tom teased.

“It’s a *crucial* decision, Dad,” he insisted, ungloved fingertips tapping on the counter. “So, uh, you think we’re gonna hear from the judge this week?” The forced casualness of his voice wasn’t fooling anyone.

Tom and Maddie exchanged a knowing look. “We don’t know,” Maddie said.

“It’s not anything for you to worry about, you know,” Tom said.

“Worried? Who’s worried?” Sonic finally settled on a cheese slice and turned to face them, plate in hand. “But, like, I dunno, if somebody *was* worried, what would they do about it?”

Tom sat back, hand on his thigh. “Well. If *somebody* was worried, they could talk to their parents about it. Or any other grown-up in the house, who all love that somebody and would

be happy to help." Around the table, the other adults nodded. "But that's only if somebody was worried."

Sonic's smile was shy. "I just- I don't want it to spoil the vacation for him. That'd suck, that's all."

His father extended an arm and the boy drew near enough to be pulled into a slightly awkward, one-armed, try-not-to-spill-pizza-on-Dad hug. "We're not gonna let anything spoil it. Promise. If there's bad news, it can keep for a week."

"And even if there *is* news we don't like," Maddie added. "It still doesn't change anything. Remember?"

Sonic nodded. "Right. Should I do anything?"

"Nothing you wouldn't already do," Tom said. "Just keep on being the best brother we know you are."

"Does that help?" Maddie asked.

"Yeah." He wandered back to the living room, sliding into his seat on the couch as if nothing had happened.

"He's such a good kid," Rosie said.

"They all are," Rachel added.

Tom took Maddie's hand, exchanged a smile.

In the living room, there was a sudden cry of *oops* and the distinct *thunk* of a plastic cup hitting the hardwood floor.

"Aw, my socks!" Sonic cried.

"Sorry!" Tails said.

"Worry not, brother. Now they match your shoes."

"I'll go get a towel," Jojo said.

The adults in the kitchen fought very hard to hold in their laughter.

Family Vacation Part 2 - Lake Day

Chapter Summary

In which the Wachowskis go to the lake.

The next day, the first day they were all officially On Vacation, was declared Lake Day. No sooner had the world's most hurried breakfast ended, were the kids instructed to get their bathing suits on. The adults loaded up two coolers, all the folding chairs the house had available, books, toys, more inflatables than any child could possibly need, and somehow managed to fit themselves, plus four kids, plus one dog, into just two cars.

Then they drove a total of five minutes and unloaded it all in the parking lot of the Boulder Reservoir.

"Not a cloud in the sky!" Tom said, whistling low. "Look at that! Perfect."

"Less marveling, more hauling," Maddie told him, handing off another stuffed tote bag full of rolled up towels.

"Do not fret, Mother," Knuckles said, giving his wrists a sharp *crack* . "You will not need to carry your bounty alone!"

"Thank you, sweetheart."

"*Brothers!"* Knuckles called out, gloved hands on his hips. "Do not dishonor your tribe leaders with your slothfulness!"

"I'm carrying two bags, dude!"

"And my arms are *little*," said Tails. "It's not my fault you're built like a tank!"

"Excuses," he declared, before dumping two more bags at their feet.

Tom took some pity on Tails, watching his youngest wavering through the air carrying the too-heavy bags (he'd tried walking, but they'd dragged through the dirt), but Sonic refused to hand his over, making sure to flex once or twice in front of Knuckles to make his point clear.

The beach wasn't crowded, but it wasn't exactly empty.

There were of course the cursory strange looks, a few older people shuffling away or moving their towels down the beach, but one or two younger kids recognize the group, tugging on each others arms and whispering to their parents as the Wachowski Family and Company laid out their blankets on the sand.

“Jojo,” Rachel called her daughter over, pulling sunscreen out of her bag as Maddie and Tom set out beach chairs for themselves and Tom’s parents.

The three Wachowski boys went to run off on their own, seeing the volleyball court empty a ways down.

“Hold it!”

Sonic skidded to a stop, dusting his brothers with sand.

She reached into her own bag, pulling out the box of Vet Approved Canine Sunscreen Wipes. “Get over here you three.”

“Aw, Mom! We don’t need those!”

“Mom says you need them, you need them.” Tom was lathering his own arms up, having inherited his parents’ near transparently pale skin. There was already the flush of a burn showing up on his neck.

Some of the kids around them were watching with bated breath, seemingly waiting for the three to show off their powers by running across the sand, but were looking more and more confused as those powers were being pushed to the side in favor of mundanity.

“*Mom*,” Sonic whined, looking over his shoulder. “Mom, they’re all *looking!”*

“Then hold still and it’ll be over faster,” she said, dragging the wipe down his arms and then over his back. “And tomorrow, when I suggest doing it yourself before we leave, maybe take me up on that.”

“Why do we even *need* this!” He twisted around so she could get to his legs, shielding his face away from the still watching kids who were peeking over their comics and books.

“The fur isn’t a perfect shield,” Tails supplied. “And we’re gonna be here all day, after all.”

Tom dragged the wipe across his forehead and said, “Done! Knuckles?”

“I will wait for Mother.”

“Suit yourself.”

Sonic frowned at him. “This isn’t at all demeaning, Oh Mighty Warrior?”

“We are shielding ourselves from the harmful radiation of Earth’s sun, like a warrior girding himself for battle.” The echidna stepped closer for his turn. “Also I like how it smells.”

Maddie released her middle child and plucked a fresh wipe for her eldest. “And this has gotta be reapplied at lunchtime.”

The hedgehog groaned. “Can we go now?”

“We release you.” Tom leaned back in his beach chair with a very *Dad* groan. “Be free, minions.”

“No one frees us,” said Knuckles, but even he was looking out towards the volleyball court.

“We’ve got sandwiches if you get hungry!” Rosie took out a romance novel that looked familiar, probably from Maddie’s collection, and set to reading.

The boys finally sped off toward the courts, kids going off to join them shyly where they were welcomed with declarations of playful war by Knuckles and a lot of poses from Sonic.

Tails sat out after the second game once a kid with Pokemon cards sat nearby, busying himself by comparing his own and trading their extras.

After four games, the kids began to disperse back to the water, inviting the three Wachowski boys.

Knuckles and Tails went off happily, splashing into the shallows. Knuckles took advantage of his size and gladly threw some of the kids a far enough distance that their parents wouldn’t worry, watching them swim back giddily for second rounds.

Tails had his own game, and the kids shrieked and laughed when he showed them how his two tails worked, lifting a few of them up before dumping them from a few feet above into the deeper water.

Sonic though-

“Come on!” One of the boys who had played volleyball with them waved him towards the growing pack of kids around his brothers. “It’s so much *fun* here!”

“Um- I’m good.”

The boy's brow furrowed. “You sure?”

“Yup yup yup. Totally, totally good. I’m a big fan of…” he looked around before landing on, “sand. Love me some sand. And rocks. Gonna go… collect them.”

The boy gave him another long look before shrugging. “Suit yourself,” he said, and went off towards Knuckles and Tails again.

Sonic watched from the land, stepping from foot to foot, as if holding himself back from the fun happening just a few feet away in the water, not noticing his grandmother, back at the towel, glance up over her book and frown.

Lunchtime was played by ear, but Sonic ended up back at the blanket before his brothers, who joined 15 minutes later, dripping wet and breathlessly laughing.

“Mother! Did you see us! We conquered the lake!”

“I saw, baby.”

“Are you *sure* you saw? You were looking at your book. I can go again so you can see.”

“I *promise* I saw.”

Knuckles didn’t look like he believed her, but saved those questions for later.

Tails forgot to step away and ended up soaking his family when he shook off, giving them an apologetic grin when there was a lot of *hey* and *aw Tails, seriously* passed around.

But finally they ended up settled on the blankets, chewing over their sandwiches.

Other families were having the same thought, and parents were calling kids and teens in from up and down the beach. A number of them who’d been in on the volleyball and lake-tossing waved as they passed by, and even a few who hadn’t been able to get in on the action paused at the blanket to ask if they could play later.

“Hey Tails, hey Knuckles!” one of the kids said, waving. They paused when they saw Sonic, as if trying to remember his name, but finally settled on a wave that he returned awkwardly before putting his whole attention a little too solidly onto his sandwich.

Another boy skidded to a stop at their blanket, then spun out towards the water. “Kayla!” he shouted out to someone still in the water. “Kayla, c’mere! These are the guys! From the internet! Come say hi!”

“Got yourselves a little fan club, hmm?” Maddie said, grinning at her boys on the blanket.

“Aw, shucks,” Tails waved her off.

“Yes, yes, quite flattering,” Knuckles said with an air of superiority. “Unnecessary, but unsurprising. A warrior does not let himself get-”

Kayla emerged from the lake.

“...distracted.”

The teenage girl flipped wet, dark blonde hair over one shoulder, strode up to the preteen boy who’d hailed her. “What guys, Dylan?”

“The robot guys!” Dylan told her, rolling his eyes. “From YouTube?”

She raised one pierced eyebrow and glanced past him towards the Wachowskis. “Oh no way.” Her lips quirked in the smallest of smiles and she gave an upwards nod. “Sup?”

Knuckles stared. He opened his mouth. Closed it again.

Sonic looked over at his brother, towards the girl, and then back at his brother. “You good…?”

“Page 43,” said Knuckles.

“What?”

“*Page 43,*” he hissed. “*Tingly feelings. Which category does this tingly feeling belong to?* ”

“How am I supposed to know! It’s your-”

“*Useless*,” he whispered, before trying hard to mentally jog through other pointers. “*Page 76, Hearts and Parts, page 84, Mingles and Tingles* -”

From a few blankets over, Kayla and Dylan’s father called them over. Dylan left with an enthusiastic nod. Kayla eyed the little group a moment longer, hands on her bikini-clad hips. “Well, see ya, I guess.” She gave a two-fingered salute, and meandered back to her family.

Tom lowered his aviators to grin at his eldest. “So she was cute, huh?”

“*Father!* ” Knuckles squeaked, half-eaten sandwich abandoned on the blanket. “*Silence! She will* ***hear you!*** ”

“Not like that she won’t,” said Sonic, and before his brother could do anything, he cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hey! Hey Kayla! Come back-”

Knuckles lunged towards Sonic, but his younger brother was too quick, zipping behind his grandfather. “*Cease your treachery!”*

“Kayla! My brother wants to tell you *all about his book-!”*

“Sonic!”

“*It’s got a part about tingling-”*

Kayla turned around. “Sorry, what was that?”

“My brother wants to tell you-”

Whatever he was about to say was cut off by his older brother swiping his feet from under him. “Pay no attention to him, Miss Kayla! He is *confused* by the heat!”

“It’s 70 degrees,” said Maddie.

“He is *frail of body*! Ignore him!”

“Least my body isn’t *going through changes*,” Sonic quipped from the sand, Knuckles fist still pinning him down. “Kayla! Kayla if you come closer maybe he’ll tell you about them!”

“Alright, you,” Big T prodded him in the ribs. “Think that’s enough.”

“But I was just-”

“Enough,” his grandfather repeated, and gestured with his eyes at Knuckles.

Sonic turned his attention back to his brother and was startled to see, behind the rage, abject mortification in the echidna's eyes. He sighed. "Alright, alright, uncle. I'm done."

"You… you swear?" Knuckles asked quietly.

"Yeah, man."

The elder sat back, releasing the younger. Sonic sat up and the two of them lingered in the awkwardness until they exchanged quarter-power punches to each other's arms.

"That's better." Big T reached behind him into one of the myriad bags and produced the Stetson he'd bought Knuckles, placing it on the teen's head. "And you. Get back on the horse."

"There are no horses here."

"He means go talk to her, Knucklehead," Sonic said.

The echidna's muzzle flushed deeply and he darted a glance over his shoulder at the other family. Kayla was laughing at something her father had said, bringing a cherry coke to her lips.

"Perhaps… later."

"Dylan plays Pokemon," Tails said. "I could talk to him first. See if maybe they both wanna do something after lunch?"

"You are a *noble compatriot!"*

Tails grinned around his sandwich, Sonic finally stepping back to his own, picking out the bits of lettuce that his father had tried to sneak it.

A bird came by and swept it up, Knuckles watching closely before passing it a bit of bread, watching almost joyfully as it swept it up and cocked its head, waiting for another. "Mother! Mother, look!"

"Mmmhm."

"Mother you are not *looking*."

She looked up.

"I am gathering an army, Mother!"

"That's nice, hon, but try not to feed the birds. They'll take you down if they get the chance."

Knuckles threw the bird another crumb when she wasn't looking. "Nothing can overpower me, my friend," he said. The bird tweeted and accepted its treat.

After lunch -and a reapplication of sunscreen- Tails trotted over to the other blanket and chatted with Dylan. When he returned, he was beaming. “They were gonna go paddleboarding, but he said they’ve got extras if we wanted to go with them. Mom, is that okay?”

Maddie looked over at Knuckles. “What do you think?”

The echidna, in turn, looked at Sonic. “Well? Do you have anything clever to say?”

Sonic raised his hands defensively. “Hey, so long as *I* don’t have to paddleboard, I don’t care.”

Jojo leaned towards him. “It’s fun! Why don’t you try. You could ride with me, if you want to.”

The hedgehog pursed his lips. “I dunno… was kinda thinkin’ I’d stay here. Catch some rays and a nap, ya know?”

“You can do whatever you want, bud,” Tom said, looking like he was five minutes from napping himself.

“Yeah, I’m good here. You guys go. Have fun. Try and keep Captain Hormones over here from embarrassing himself too bad.”

Knuckles opened his mouth to retort, but Jojo and Tails were pulling him up and away from the blanket.

Maddie watched them follow Dylan and Kayla off towards the parking lot, and return a few moments later. Knuckles, as expected, had a stack of paddleboards held aloft over his head. Unexpectedly, Kayla was carrying her own, over her shoulder, as if it didn’t weigh nearly forty pounds. As the group passed by, her eldest caught her eye and hissed, “She’s an *Amazon*, Mother!”

“Have funnnnn,” she sing-songed, waggling her fingers at him.

“Oh, ain’t that the cutest thing,” Rosie hummed. She watched them set off from the shore, then went to pick up her book and noticed Sonic on the blanket. Rather than napping, like his father, the boy was propped up on his elbows, watching the little group set sail.

There was some awkward fumbling and balancing going on. Tails and Knuckles and Jojo fell off once or twice (even Kayla nearly had her own spill), but they shook it off fast and were racing across the lake in no time, giving rides to whatever small kids managed to catch up, balancing in the middle.

Before long, Knuckles had Kayla laughing at some anecdote, Tails and Dylan pretending the oars were lightsabers, trying to see who could get knocked off first.

Tom eventually began to snore, Big T following along soon after, stetson back over his face, which was enough of a cue for Rachel and Maddie to go off towards the little trails on the side, talking about going on a walk.

“Can you keep an eye on them?” Maddie asked. “Just… call me if they drown.”

“Call after they drown. Got it.”

“And you,” Maddie kneeled, pinching her son’s nose from where he was lying on the blanket, comic book open. “You want to walk with us?”

He looked back at the water, and then down at his nearly finished comic. “Sure,” he shrugged. There wasn’t much else to do, and at least he wouldn’t need to listen to his Grandfather and Dad snore in sync (which was sounding more and more like someone had decided to operate heavy machinery on vacation).

“Have fun,” Rosie said, waving them off as she opened up her romance novel again, tossing a towel over her husband’s head to muffle the snoring.

Sonic was quiet for the first few minutes of their walk. He ran ahead once or twice, zipping back to tell the two adults about other trails they could try, but after he’d done that a few more times he got bored enough to lazily follow along at a slow pace, grabbing rocks off the ground and practicing pitching maneuvers into the brushes.

The conversation was mostly boring; books that the sisters were reading, or how their kids were doing at school.

But then Rachel switched topics, bringing up the “Gotta tell you, I’m just glad Jojo’s not at that age yet.”

Maddie looked towards her sister, stepping over a tree root. “What age?”

“*That* age.”

“Ah.”

“She still thinks romance is the worst thing to happen to anyone.”

“She’s right.” Sonic threw another rock towards a tree, and a few birds flew out, glaring down at them. “None of that junk makes any sense.”

“You’ve got a point there,” said Rachel. “I’m pretty much sworn off any sort of dating right now. My last one was a disaster.”

“At least the wedding rehearsal cake was good,” said Maddie.

Sonic twisted around. “Wait! There was *cake!?* Aw, why didn’t I get some!”

“Because your aunt was still being an idiot,” said Rachel, tweaking his ear. “Now c’mon. I wanna get to the top before nighttime.”

Their plans of getting to the bluffs were only sidelined again when Sonic’s ears began twitching, and he halted in place.

Maddie turned to look at her son. “Baby, you okay?”

“*Shhh*.” His ears rotated again, finally catching onto a direction to their left through the trees. “I think… I think I hear Knuckles?”

There was a pathway a few feet ahead cutting through a denser part of the forest, towards the edge of the bluffs overlooking the lake. Sunshine gasped through, brighter from where it reflected off the water, and the dirt was layered thick in leaves and pine needles that kept their footfalls from making too much noise.

“-text me anytime…”

Peering through splayed branches, the three of them could just see the bright red body of Maddie’s eldest sitting beside Kayla on the rocky ledge. She was writing something on his paw pad, glitter vibrant on the black scratchy skin.

Sonic made a move to step forward, but Maddie grabbed him quickly, putting a finger over her mouth.

“Ya know,” the girl was saying, “if the stupid boys back home were more like you, I might like boys more.”

“You do not?”

She shrugged. “I dunno.”

He mulled that over a minute. “You are… exploring still.”

“I guess.”

Her stance was shifting, changing, enough that Maddie understood what was about to happen. Sonic looked up when his mother’s hand grabbed his, Rachel already sneaking away up the path again.

“What was *that* all about?” Sonic asked, once they were a far enough distance away to talk again.

Maddie gave Rachel a look and sighed. “It’s… a lesson that he’s gonna learn the hard way, baby.”

“*What* lesson.”

She opened her mouth, but ended up just shaking her head. “You’ll see later. Promise.”

It didn’t make much sense, but Sonic just shrugged. Whatever his brother was doing wasn’t as interesting as the view just ahead of them, the small group of three finally making it to the top of the small mountain.

Broken Hearts and Brotherly Bonds

Chapter Summary

In which Knuckles has two talks.

For all his talk about being the most alert warrior to ever walk the planet, Knuckles didn't hear the small audience as they'd peered through to watch him. He was too busy trying to remember what page of the book best categorized the *tingly feelings* watching Kayla sitting with her feet dangling on the ledge, their paddleboards tied to a tree branch in the water below.

"D'you have TikTok?"

"That is what my heart is doing right this very moment."

The girl laughed, absolute music to his ears, and smacked him on the arm. "Dork. Hang on." She dug around in her drawstring backpack and pulled out a purple glitter pen. Taking hold of his hand, she turned it up and wrote something on the pad of his palm. "There. S'my number. You could, you know, text me or whatever."

Eyes wide, he stared at his hand (which she was still holding). "I could?"

"Yeah."

"Tonight?"

"Whenever," she grinned, releasing him to sit back, leaning on the heels of her hands.

Reverently he ran a finger across the glittery writing on his palm.

"Ya know, if the stupid boys back home were more like you, I might like boys more."

"You do not?"

She shrugged. "I dunno."

He mulled that over a minute. "You are… exploring still."

"I guess." She drew one knee up.

He forced himself to keep his eyes on her face. "That is natural."

"I dunno," she said again, digging in the sand aimlessly with a forefinger. "The girls in my class keep bugging me. 'Why don't you have a boyfriend yet?' It's annoying."

“Mm.” He nodded, shifting so he was sitting up straighter. “I must admit, at first I was encouraged to hear I might have a tactical advantage over the boys in your village… but I realize now that was *not* what you were implying.”

Her next smile was tinged with guilt. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to, like, give the wrong impression. You’re really cool.”

“But you do not…” His muzzle flushed, wrinkled. “...tingle.”

She bit her bottom lip. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “There is nothing to be sorry for.”

“You could still text me, if you wanted. But I’d get it if you didn’t want to. You probably have enough friends already.”

“In my experience, one can never have too many friends.”

She smiled and his heart broke, but he smiled back anyway.

The trip back from their walk was a shorter one downhill, and Maddie was glad for it. It wasn’t twenty minutes later, Sonic back with his comics, Rachel scrolling through her phone, and her own book out, that the paddleboarders returned from their adventure.

Kayla and Dylan went their own way, waving and promising to meet up again before the week was out (their family on vacation a little longer than the Wachowskis planned on being there) for another round of paddleboarding or swimming in the lake. Kayla dipped down to give Knuckles a hug that he carefully returned, watching their family leave before trotting back to his own family.

When he returned to the blanket, he sat himself directly in Maddie’s lap, nudging her book out of the way.

“Oh, baby…”

“You were right, Mother,” he mumbled. “That was… quite a doozy.”

She carded her fingers through his quills soothingly. “First time I’m not happy to have been right. I’m so sorry, sweetheart.”

Tom reached out from his own chair to pat the boy on the arm.

Tails got up from the Rube Goldbergian construction he was building with rocks and sticks and came to hug his big brother from behind.

From his spot on the blanket, Sonic rolled his comic book uncomfortably in his hands. Beside him, Jojo sighed.

As the sun was starting its descent over the horizon, the adults decided it was time to pack up and head home. It was a quiet ride, followed by a quiet dinner, which Knuckles asked to take to his room.

“You sure?” Maddie asked, brushing his cheek with her fingers. Behind her, the rest of the family was gathering for another movie in the living room.

“I am sure.”

Perched on the arm of the couch, Sonic watched him shuffle off up the stairs.

About halfway through the movie, he slipped out of the room, muttering an excuse, and Maddie turned to see him creeping up the stairs. Heart swelling, she didn’t call him back.

“Go away,” came the low growl the instant Sonic stepped into the bunk room. “I am not in the mood for your snide remarks.”

The hedgehog shut the door quietly, locking it behind him, just in case Tails or Jojo got curious. “I’m not a 24/7 snark machine, you know.”

He only got a grunt in response, accompanied by the form on the bottom bunk rolling to face the wall.

So he sat down on the floor beside the bed.

He didn’t know how to start.

He knew he had to.

He just didn’t know *how* .

This was so far out of his wheelhouse.

With a sigh, he let his knees drop, and one of them landed on *the book* .

He picked it up, flipped it open to the table of contents. “Page 136.”

“What?”

“Page 136,” he said again, quickly turning the pages. “The Pitfalls of Falling in Love.” The words felt foreign on his tongue but he said them anyway. “Did you get to this part yet?”

There was an unintelligible grumble.

“Huh?”

“I *said* I skipped it!” Knuckles’ voice became clear as he lifted his face from the pillow at last. “...couldn’t imagine needing it.”

“Oooof,” Sonic winced. “Forget the girl. The fall offa that high horse had to hurt.”

“Go away.”

“Nah, I think I’ll stay. Do a little lite reading. You could listen if you felt like it.”

There was a *fwump* as Knuckles put his face back in the pillow.

But he didn’t tell Sonic to leave again.

So Sonic read out loud.

Awkwardly. Uncomfortably. But he read.

“One of the hardest, but most important things to remember is that reciprocation isn’t guaranteed. Which means sometimes the answer is going to be ‘No’. Which, we can admit, seriously sucks. But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t respect that ‘No’. You shouldn’t pressure someone into feelings they don’t have-”

“I would never-”

“I’m just reading what it says.” Sonic cleared his throat, found his place. “On the other hand, one or two or even a string of ‘No’s doesn’t mean there isn’t a ‘Yes’ still out there waiting for you. And each time you try again, remember that it’s an incredibly brave thing you’re doing, by putting yourself out there.”

“...brave?”

“S’what it says.” Sonic held up the book, pointing to the passage.

“Hmm.”

“Yeah.” He laid the book back in his lap. “So, you know, that’s something anyway.” He flipped idly around. “Guess this thing isn’t totally stupid. You want me to keep reading?”

“No. No that’s enough.”

“Hey,” Sonic said, eyes still on the page. “M’sorry. If I hadn’t goaded you into it, maybe you wouldn’t have, um, maybe you wouldn’t be feeling like this.”

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder. “No. Even without your teasing, I would most likely have still made the attempt.”

“Yeah?”

“I mean, did you not *see* how she lifted the paddleboard one-handed?”

Sonic huffed a laugh. “Yeah, she was a pretty cool chick.”

Knuckles lifted his hand from Sonic’s shoulder, tucking it behind his head as he rolled over onto his back. “Absolutely incredible.” He lifted his other hand, still marked with purple

glitter. “And I think she will make a fine friend.”

“Yeah?” Sonic twisted, setting the book aside. “It doesn’t hurt anymore?”

“Oh, no, it still hurts a thousand times worse than the Wheel of Pain on Alpha Motrius,” Knuckles said. “But I think, in time, it will fade.”

“That’s good- wait, the wheel of what now?”

“A trial I encountered in my travels through the galaxy. Something I have spoken with the mind healer about and made peace with. Worry not, brother.”

“Worrying comes with the whole brother package, man,” Sonic reminded him, arms folded on the mattress, watching his big brother stare wistfully at the phone number on his palm. “You, uh, maybe wanna come downstairs? Catch the end of the movie?”

Knuckles shook his head. “Not tonight. You go on.”

“I could stay.”

Another head shake. “I have gained solace from your company, but I would like to be alone now. Perhaps I’ll give that chapter I skipped another look.”

“Alright.” Sonic reached out to clasp the echidna by the arm as he stood. “I’ll see you in the morning then.”

When he returned to the couch, Maddie was waiting to pull him in tight. “I love you so much,” she whispered in his ear.

“He’s gonna be okay, right?”

“He is.” She laid her cheek against the top of his head. “In no small part because he’s got you looking out for him.”

Satisfied, he let himself relax into her hold, and spent the rest of the movie there.

Go-Karts and Trepidations

Chapter Summary

> In which The Wachowski Family Vacation continues, and Sonic avoids the watery elephant in the room with varying degrees of success.

When morning came, everyone was relieved to find Knuckles in better spirits, out in the yard with Maddie first thing, doing yoga among the goats while Rosie gathered fresh eggs from the chicken coop.

“Good to see you bouncing back, bud,” said Tom when his son came back inside smelling like grass and sunshine.

Surprisingly, Knuckles leaned into Tom’s side, his Father pulling him in closer. “Does it get easier?” he asked into Tom’s shirt.

“Nah. Wish I could tell you different. But I had plenty of rejections in my day, and each one stung just like the first.”

“With your meager looks and strength, I believe that to be true.”

“Love you too, bud.”

Knuckles went quiet for a moment. “Though perhaps that is not a terrible thing. You did end up with Mother.”

“I sure did.”

“And she is superior to *all*.”

“You’ve got that right, bud.” He tweaked his eldest’s nose. “Think about it that way. You’re just… waiting for the best one.”

“Ah. That is… comforting.”

“Glad to hear it.”

Breakfast was a louder affair than dinner the night before, the entire family sitting around the kitchen table, passing around sausages and maple syrup and eggs. Knuckles put away a dozen on his own, Maddie figuring out the toaster before he could get to it.

Big T washed dishes while Maddie scrubbed jam thumbprints off the table, and Tom scrolled through his phone to try and find some sort of activity for the day.

"*Please* tell me it's not another lake," Sonic said after he'd helped put the dishes in the cabinets.

"Why? You didn't even get to swim yet, bud."

"They're boring," Sonic said, too quickly.

Tom just rolled his eyes, turning his phone around so his son could see what he was looking over. The website for Gateway Park Fun Center was kitschy and out of date as far as internet websites went, but it promised a fair share of fun activities. "Look-" Tom scrolled down. "They've got a few games for prizes. Apparently there's a batting cage and-"

His phone was taken before he could finish, Sonic zipping over to his brothers and Jojo to show them what their Dad had found.

The adults could hear them oohing and ahhing excitedly over the promise of go-karts and mini golf and a hockey rink.

"Oh *sweet*," Tails' tails twitched behind him. "They've got an arcade!"

"And go-karts!" Jojo added, pointing towards the little icon. "Oh man! This looks *so cool*."

Rosie and Big T elected to stay back, glad for a little quiet to get some reading done, and so there was just enough room to fit everyone in Tom and Maddie's car without too much trouble (though Knuckles had to shift drastically over to make sure his hands didn't collide with Jojo or Rachel).

Each kid got a punch card for rides and games, and explicit instructions to meet up at the snack stand at noon for lunch. Then, to the adults' surprise, they were invited to join in the first round of mini-golf.

Sonic needled Tom about taking too long on what would be mediocre shots anyway, and Knuckles lost his first three balls to the adjacent highway when he put too much power into his swing, and Tails wound up winning by calculating each trajectory perfectly, but no one was a sore sport and when they were done, they all agreed on go-karts next.

The adults were over the weight-limit for the carts, so they had to stand by the fence and watch, but they didn't mind.

After go-karts, the kids couldn't agree on batting cages versus hockey, so the adults split up, Tom going with Sonic and Jojo to batting and the sisters taking Knuckles and Tails to the rink.

Tom and Sonic discovered that Jojo was thinking about softball and had a great time giving her tips on improving her swing.

Knuckles and Tails discovered that Rachel had been a Roller Derby queen in her teens and were unbelievably delighted to watch her strap on in-line skates and show off some of her old moves.

For lunch they ate way-too-expensive hotdogs and slurpees. Then the temperature climbed into the 80s and they opted to spend the afternoon in the arcade where it was air-conditioned.

Sonic was convinced they could win enough tickets to get the PS5 up on the highest shelf of the prize wall, but even after two hours and using up all the spaces on all of their punch cards, they came up woefully short. Then Jojo suggested that quantity trumped quality when it came to prizes, and they came home with two shopping bags full of the cheapest, knick-knackiest, made-in-China junk the arcade had to offer. They dumped the bags out on the living room floor and spent the time until dinner sorting through the pile as if it were Halloween candy.

“Mother!” Knuckles plucked one of the small arcade prizes off the floor and handed it to her. “Your thanks for today's adventure!”

“Thanks, sweetheart.”

Tom looked at his other two sons who very quickly hid their prizes beneath their arms. “Look somewhere else, old man,” Sonic said, before finally relenting and letting his Dad pick between the cheapest, smallest prizes.

“Oh goody,” said Tom, looking between his options of an eraser or a rubber band bracelet. “However will I choose?”

When Sonic wasn’t looking, Tails slipped him a miniature plinko game that Tom quickly shoved into his pocket before Sonic could see.

Dinner ended up being grilled on the back porch, and Maddie unveiled everything for s’mores, the boys cheering. Tails, methodical as always, toasted his marshmallows until they were browned. Sonic waited for his to burn, cackling at the blaze at the end of his stick.

The day ended quickly with the kids in their bunks, the adults staying up late by the fire, drinking a little too much and hushing each other when their voices got too loud.

Sonic was happy to put a cap on an excellent day, ready to embrace whatever came next, until;

“Mom said we’re goin back to the lake tomorrow,” said Jojo from above him.

Sonic stared at the bottom of her bunk. “My parents didn’t say anything about that.”

“Mom did at lunch,” Tails whispered from his top bunk across the room. “It’s gonna be super hot tomorrow.”

“Perhaps Kayla will be in attendance,” Knuckles said. “I would like to continue working on friendships outside of Green Hills. Father said it will be *beneficial* for me.”

“I’ll pack my Pokemon cards,” said Tails. “Oooh, Sonic! You didn’t get to go out with us last time!”

“Our smallest brother speaks the truth.” Knuckles’ eyes glowed through the dark, glancing over towards Sonic’s own glowing eyes. “You did not take part in our merriment.”

“Yeah, well, there’s not much to *like*. It’s just *water*.”

“It’s fun, dude,” said Jojo. “Maybe you could come out with me. Show off how fast you can swim.”

“Nah. I’ll just stay on the side.”

“But Sonic-”

“I said *no*.”

The room fell quiet, no one used to Sonic being so serious.

“Okay,” Jojo said. “No one’s forcing you or anything… But, you know… it’s not as much fun without you.”

She waited for him to respond. When he didn’t, she rolled over in her bunk. There was more rustling, the room finally settling.

Sonic stayed awake a while after. Sleep wouldn’t come easy that night, not when all he could see around closed eyes were rocks and sunbeams cutting through deep water, fading slowly away into the dark.

The kids seem to have mostly forgotten about Sonic’s mood when everyone was packing their bags for the beach and getting into the car, though Knuckles and Tails did give their brother worried side glances every so often while the car trundled its way through the dirt roads towards the water.

Kayla and Dylan were indeed there, and to Knuckles’ relief, the girl seemed to have forgotten all about their awkward talk from a day before and ran up to him, ready to take on another day at the lake.

“Mother. May I-”

“Go,” Maddie waved him off, setting up her chair. “Have fun!”

“Thanks, Mrs. Wachowski!” Kayla shouted over her shoulder.

“He got over that quick,” Big T mused, rummaging around in the cooler.

“It probably helps that it was a genuine ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ thing,” Tom said, reaching in for his own bottle of water.

“How’s that?”

“Maddie, you wanna take this one?” Tom said, handing her a seltzer.

“We might’ve overheard some of their conversation,” she admitted, a tad guiltily. “And from what I gathered, she’s not, um, how to put this- not of the right *persuasion* for Knuckles.”

“Oh you mean she’s gay,” Rosie said brightly.

Maddie blinked. “Uh. Yeah. Right.”

Tom was also blinking at his parents.

“What?” Rosie said. “You forget I used to do hair and make-up for the fellas down at Queen Up. They thought I was a regular Dolly Parton. Used to go out for all sorts of drinks with’m after we stayed for shows. They *loved* your Father, too.”

“Dad??”

“I like a good show, son,” Big T said from behind his newspaper. “They played a lot of country.”

“They used to come to the farm sometimes, too. Your father showed them how to ride the horses and everything.”

“Those guys were drag queens?” Tom gaped.

“You ever have a problem with any of ‘em?” Rosie asked.

“What? No, of course not! I just thought they were, I don’t know, ranch hands.”

“We would’ve brought you to a show, but they still let folks smoke in the bars back then, and I didn’t want it stuntin’ your growth or somethin’.”

“What’s a drag show?” asked Sonic, who everyone had forgotten was in one of the beach chairs.

His grandmother’s eyes glinted. “They don’t allow smokin’ anymore, come to think of it.”

“Day shows don’t serve drinks,” said Big T, flipping to the next page.

“How do you even *know* that, Dad.”

Big T looked over his book. “It’s good for a date night.”

“Oh, you’ll have to meet them,” said Rosie, tapping her grandson’s arm. “They’ll go absolutely ga-ga over finally meetin’ you.”

“They *know* about me?”

“Course they do, baby.”

“Your Grandma's got an arsenal of photos ready,” grunted Big T.

“Well,” Tom said, unscrewing the cap from his water bottle. “Looks like we’ve got something to look forward to when we get back home.”

Big T chuckled. “Ranch hands… as if any of those hands had ever touched farm equipment.”

“I wasn’t looking that close, Dad!”

“Dad, you didn’t answer my question,” Sonic said. “What a drag queen? Is it like drag racing? ‘Cause you told me that’s not allowed as long as I’m under your roof.”

Maddie bit her lip to keep from laughing. “No, no it’s… another thing entirely. It’s-”

“Oh let him be surprised, Madeline,” Rosie cut her off. “That’s half the fun.”

And no matter how many more times he asked, they’d only tell him to ‘wait and see’.

In terms of easy money, Wade had practically hit the jackpot when Tom asked him to check on the mail every day for a week in exchange for $150 and a dozen glazed donuts.

“It’ll look like this,” said Tom, showing Wade the empty envelope they’d gotten for Tails. “Just a really big white envelope with the judges seal in the corner. Think you can remember that?”

“No problem, Brochowski.” Wade had waved him off before asking, “What’s the big whoop with this thing anyway?”

“The ‘big whoop’,” Tom said, brow furrowed, “is that this is gonna tell us whether or not the government’s gonna let us adopt Knuckles.”

“Oh.” Wade’s eyes widened. “Oh geez.”

“Right. So it’s kind of important.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Wade nodded solemnly. “I got it.”

Tom had made his deputy take a picture of the envelope just in case.

The picture which he now had pulled up on his phone screen, comparing it to the big, white envelope in his hand as he stood on the Wachowski’s porch.

“Oh man,” he breathed. “Oh man oh man oh man.” He put the phone back in his pocket, tucked the envelope under his arm, and ran back to his cruiser, a string of *oh man*s trailing after him.

He Took to it Like a Hedgehog to Water

Chapter Summary

> In which Sonic cops to his fear of water (and the reason behind it), with a little prodding from Grandma Rosie.

The boys came back from the lake for lunch, munching on leftover pizza Rosie had wrapped in foil. They stayed on the blanket only long enough for Maddie and Tom to reapply sunscreen.

“You sure you don’t wanna come out with us?” Tails asked Sonic as Tom ran the wipe over his legs.

“Nah.”

Knuckles cocked his head, holding his quills up so Maddie could get his back. “I understand your hesitation. Knowing you cannot beat me at swimming must be so difficult for you. Or maybe you are just-”

“Not everything’s a *competition*. Just *drop it*.”

Even Maddie paused from where she was getting the back of Knuckles’ neck, swiveling around to look at her son, the other pairs of eyes following suit.

“Bud?” Tom lifted his glasses, frowning. “You good?”

Sonic opened his mouth, struggling to find the words. “I’m *fine*,” he ground out. “I’m just- I-” Coming up short, he stood up with a growl and stomped off towards the trees before zipping up the trails.

Tom followed the treeline towards where his middle son had gone. “What was *that* about?”

Maddie shook her head, getting Knuckles’ shoulders. “No idea.”

“Did we say something wrong?” Tails asked.

“Perhaps we should go after him,” Knuckles began.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Maddie assured them. “Go on, go play.”

Jojo was watching the bluffs, catching glimpses of blue through the trees.

“It’ll be alright, guys,” Tom said, getting to his feet. “C’mon. Who wants a fishing lesson?”

That was enough to distract them, and the trio followed him off towards the boat rentals.

Maddie stayed behind with her in-laws and her sister, picking up her book and glancing up to make sure she knew where her son was. The flashes of blue moved up and down the mountain, and occasionally a group of kids would point up, amazed, murmuring excitedly about how fast the pint-sized hero was.

It was a relief to be able to at least know where he was, especially after the incident just a scant month ago. Maddie dragged in a deep breath. It was taking everything in her not to follow him up the mountain to try and pin him down, to maybe figure out what was bothering him. But he needed his space. And she'd respect that, and trust that he'd come back when he was ready.

As long as he didn't stay up for too long.

"Don't worry about it, Darlin'." Rosie echoed her thoughts, patting the mother's arm. "Let'm have his moment."

She nodded, watching the blue blur go up the mountain for what must have been the twentieth time. "I just wish I knew what was going on in that head of his sometimes."

"He'll tell you when he's ready."

She breathed out slowly. "It's easier with Knuckles and Tails. They never *stop* talking about their feelings."

"All kids are different, Madeline. You know that."

She did. She really did. She just wished that her son would open up a little faster instead of waiting until after he'd beat himself up for whatever battles were waging in his brain.

"You're doin' everything you can do," Rosie assured her. "Takin' him to a doctor, givin' him his space, bein' there and patient with him. It's the most you can do. Just give it time. *Trust* me."

"Thanks, Rosie."

Her mother-in-law winked. "Now stop your worrying and start *vacationing*. That's what we're here for."

Resolved to let Sonic open up on his own time, Maddie picked up her book and started to read.

Sonic did indeed come back within an hour in much better spirits than when he'd left. The mountain air had apparently done him some good, though the smile he plastered on his face when he sat back on the blanket was a little too forced.

"Hey there, baby." Maddie did her best not to reach out and grab him, the urge to tug him close absolutely clawing. She held back. Her son had a tendency to scurry away if he was

pushed, and she wouldn't be the one to scare him off. "You alright?"

"Oh yeah. Just needed a breather." He stretched and then went through his backpack to find the comic he wanted. "Must've not gotten enough sleep last night or something."

About the time he was settling into Tom's abandoned chair with the comic book, Kayla and Dylan's mom stopped over, gushing over how sweet Tails and Knuckles and Jojo were and revealing that she'd snuck daiquiris in her cooler and would they like to join her. Rachel was up before the question was even finished and Maddie followed after, laughing.

The blanket was quiet then. Rosie with her book, Big T snoring again under his hat. Out on the lake there was a shriek and Sonic looked up. On the rented boat, Knuckles had apparently caught a fish by punching his bare fist into the water and spearing it with his knuckles. Jojo and Tails were losing their minds over it.

"Looks like they're havin' an awful lot of fun over there."

Sonic twisted back to look at his grandmother, who had her book perched against her knee, saving the page. He shrugged. "Nah. It looks… totally lame." The lie wasn't even enough to convince him, and he leaned back on his elbows, looking out towards the water.

Rosie hummed. "Never known you to back out'a some sort of fun."

"I'm just tired, I guess."

"Never known you to be much tired in the middle of the day, either."

"Yeah, well, maybe you don't know everything about me," he snapped, wincing when he heard himself and ducking away.

She clucked her tongue. "C'mere, pumpkin."

After a moment, he hefted himself up. Eyes on the ground, he shuffled over towards her until she was able to pull him onto the beach chair with her, tucking her chin against the top of her head. "You alright, darlin'?"

"M'fine."

"You sure? Seemin' awfully snappy."

He winced again. "Sorry, Grandma."

"S'alright. Just makes me sad seein' my grandbaby lookin' so chewed up and spat out." She ran her fingers through his quills, one or two of them falling free from his back. She frowned. "Somethin' you wanna tell me?"

He shook his head.

"Alright. Well. I won't push. But if you wanna talk, I'm here."

He nodded, leaning against her shoulder, content enough to stay on her lap, watching the others out on the water. Knuckles and Tails were working out a system now, where Tails hovered over the surface of the water, pointing out where the fish were, and the Knuckles would lunge, dive, and resurface with a fish on each fist. Jojo would hold out a net for him to deposit them, and Tom just sat back, looking both flabbergasted and proud.

Sonic began to squirm, biting hard into his cheek to keep from moving.

“You sure there’s nothin’ you want to tell me?”

Sonic stared out at the water, drawing his knees a little closer. “Um…”

His grandmother stayed completely silent, waiting.

“Well… uh… what if I *knew* someone who had a problem.”

“Like a friend?”

“Yeah,” he said, too quickly. “Exactly. A friend. With a problem.”

“What’s the friend’s name?”

“You don’t know them. They’re a… a foreign exchange student. From another planet.”

“Ah.” She nodded, tipping her large sunglasses up to rest in her blonde hair. “And what’s the problem with this friend?”

“I- *my friend*, is scared of water. Not like drinking water. Just swimming water.”

She hummed. “You know, sometimes fears don’t have any reason to be there. Like spiders or the dark. I was afraid of plenty of things when I was young without much reason behind them. Maybe your *friend* is scared of somethin’ he hasn’t tried yet.”

Sonic went quiet, staring off towards the lake. “But… but what if my friend has a reason to be scared?”

“What sort’a reason, pumpkin?”

He swallowed. There was a thick lump sitting just against his throat, and his skin felt like it might have been suddenly too tight for his body. “What if,” he said, quietly. “What if my friend kind of sort of almost drowned?”

Her chest stuttered. “When was that?”

“Um… a few months ago? When I- when he was saving an enemy.”

“That was very, very kind of him.”

“I guess. But he didn’t know how to swim. So the enemy had to go back and get him after he’d already passed out.”

Rosie leaned her chin on Sonic's head, drawing in a long breath. "That sounds awfully scary."

"… yeah."

"Did the friend tell their parents?"

Sonic shook his head. "He didn't want them to be scared, too."

"Well, you just tellin' me this makes *me* scared. Cause I bet that friend'a yours has a Gramma who loves him more than anythin', and the idea that he might not be here anymore probably makes that Gramma real, real upset."

"I'm sorry…"

"What've you got to be sorry for, darlin'? It wasn't *my* grandbaby I almost lost."

He went quiet again, curled against her chest. "Grandma?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"I wasn't talking about a friend…"

"I know, baby."

"Oh."

She pulled him a little closer. "I know my son and your Mama would want to know about this, hon. It'd make a whole lotta sense. Maybe they could even give you a hand. Help you out."

"I don't want them to be *sad*." He flicked at a bit of sand on the arm of the chair, brows low. "My entire stupid self always makes them sad, and it sucks."

"Probably because they love you a whole lot and don't wanna hear about their baby bein' hurt."

"I guess…" He flicked at another grain of sand. "Then I shouldn't tell them."

"Course you should. We gotta know about that stuff, pumpkin'. Sad stuff ain't ever nice to hear, but it's part of what makes it easier to see you grow. Easier to do it when there are people helpin' you, too."

"That's what Mom and Dad said."

"That's good. Means I raised my baby boy right. And that he found himself one heck of a smart lady, too."

That Smart Lady and her sister appeared again from the other blanket, laughing, arm-in-arm, and Sonic very quickly fell quiet, giving Rosie a pleading look.

“Hon’-”

“*Later*,” he begged. “Just… *not now?*”

“Sonic, you gotta at least-”

“*Please, Grandma?”*

She relented with a sigh and a stiff nod and he let his shoulders drop, jumping off her lap to go meet his mother.

The rest of the crew came back a while later, from returning the rented boat with a Styrofoam cooler full of fish. Tom set it down, the stretched, his t-shirt riding up on his belly,

“Uh oh,” Maddie said with a smirk. “Looks like we missed a spot with the sunscreen.”

“Aw shit…” He poked at the red burn that was starting to appear at his navel, and it went white before turning back to red.

“Language, Thomas,” Rosie chided.

“It’s not my fault. You gave me this skin.” He poked at it again, wincing.

“Apologies, darlin’.” But she didn’t really seem all that sorry.

The fish had to get to the fridge, so they packed everything back up and headed home. Jojo, Tails, and Knuckles were close to passing out when they got back to the house, nodding off before dinner on the couch. Sonic was a little more cognizant, having been absent from their afternoon adventures, and retreated to his room for some much needed alone time.

Tom and Maddie took what quiet they could get, grabbing beers from the fridge while Tom waited on the grill to heat up for the mutilated fish Knuckles had speared.

“Look at who I found!”

The pair twisted around when Rosie appeared with Big T in tow.

Tom saluted with his beer. “Hey, Mom. Thought you were catching a nap.”

“Oh, you know how we are. Full day and all that.” She reached out and squeezed Big T’s arm, the two giving each other knowing looks. “Honey,” said Rosie, “mind taking over the grilling for our boy? Show him how it’s really done?”

“Hey! I know how to grill!”

“Of course you do, baby.”

Maddie frowned, glancing over towards Tom. He shrugged.

Big T barely even grunted before he was snatching the spatula away from his son, picking up the plate of fish before heading out the french doors.

“Mom-”

“Oh let him do it, dear. It makes him feel useful.” She grabbed a bag for herself before sitting at the kitchen table. “In the meantime, I think we need to have a little chat.” At their faces, she flapped her hand gently. “It isn’t about *you*. S’about one of my grandbabies.” She waited until they were sitting, taking a dainty sip of her beer. “So- I got to talkin’ to him today, and he told me some stuff I think you should know…”

Sonic was happy enough to stay holed away in the shared room for a little while, lying on his stomach while he played aimlessly with their Gameboy. So it was a surprise when there was a knock on the door.

It cracked open, and Tom’s head peeked through. “Hey, bud. You busy?”

Sonic shrugged. “Not really.”

“Mind if me and Mom come in for a minute?”

Their son sat up, sitting cross legged on the bed. “Am I in trouble or something?”

“No, sweetheart.” Maddie appeared behind Tom, crossing the room to sit besides Sonic on the bed. “Not in trouble.”

“So-”

“So,” said Tom, sitting on Sonic’s left, “we were just talking to Grandma.”

Instantly the boy’s ears flattened against his head. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Tom laid a hand on his son’s knee. “I wish you’d told us.”

“One sad thing a day,” Sonic said, trying to shrug. “There’s a backlog.”

“Baby…” Maddie said softly. Her hand came to his quills, stroking softly. “It’s a little bigger than some of the other things we’ve talked about. And if we *had* talked about it, we might not have picked this spot for our trip.”

“We knew you weren’t a fan of water, bud,” Tom said, squeezing the boy’s knee. “But we didn’t know *why*. And if we’d known, we could’ve done something to help.”

“Did you talk to Dr. Burdett about it?” Maddie asked.

Sonic shook his head. “Only Gramma. And Knuckles knows, ‘cause he was there.” He gripped the Gameboy tightly. “He almost drowned too. But he can just- just go back in, like it was nothing. I thought maybe it was something wrong with *me*.”

Over his head, his parents exchanged a look.

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” Maddie said seriously. “You went through something that a lot of people never go through. And you have every reason to be *scared*.”

“But-” he stared down at the Gameboy, fiddling with the controls. “But I don’t *want* to be.” His eyes were burning, and it wasn’t fair. Wasn’t fair that his parents were looking at him like that. Wasn’t fair that everything rolled off Knuckles so easily when it came to life or death challenges. Wasn’t fair that he was on vacation and he couldn’t even *do* anything. “It just- it *sucks*.”

Maddie took the Gameboy from his hands, putting it gently behind him. “Why? Because you don’t get to go out with your brothers?”

“Because I don’t get to do *anything*.” He wiped his eyes with a frustrated growl. “They’re out there having the best time *ever* and I’m sitting out there reading the same comics fifty times.”

Tom slid off the bed to kneel in front of his son, trying to meet his eyes. “You know, being brave doesn’t mean that you’re not still afraid of something.”

“That’s dumb,” Sonic muttered.

“Maybe. But it’s still *true*. It doesn’t mean you need to face everything at once, but even the little steps can be brave. Telling your grandma? That was brave. Talking to us is brave, too.” He reached out and squeezed Sonic’s hand. “So we can figure out what the next brave step is.”

He squirmed on the bed. “Do I have to choose *now?*”

Maddie shook her head. “Let’s just take this one step at a time, alright?”

“Yeah… I guess we can do that.”

“And next time,” said Maddie, pulling him to her side, “*tell* us. This is what we’re here for, yeah? We actually want to know when our kids have been hurt. It helps us help *you*.”

He leaned into her side. “I guess… I could talk to Dr. Alice when we get back.”

“That’s a very brave step.”

“And maybe-” he squeezed his eyes shut a moment. “Maybe I could… *try* to get in the water?”

“Don’t push anything,” said Tom. “But if you really want to, Mom and I can definitely help out.”

“Even if everyone thinks I’m a massive loser?”

“*No ones* going to think that,” Maddie promised, leaning down to kiss between his ears. “Being afraid of water because you nearly drowned doesn’t make you a loser.”

“She’s right,” said Tom. “Everything else about you makes you a loser.”

That at least got a laugh out of Sonic, and he wiped at his eyes again. “Okay.”

Tom reached out a fist. “One step at a time?”

Reaching out his own fist, Sonic met his Dad halfway, his mom joining into the power bump. “One step at a time.”

“Good.” Tom leaned over to press his own kiss to the boy’s head. “We should probably start going down soon. Grandpa T’s grilling Knuckles’ fish, and we’re going to see if it’s actually edible after getting punched.”

Punched fish didn’t look very pretty on the plate, but it tasted just fine. They ate on the back deck, and then Rachel brought out sparklers and the kids all ran around with them, scaring the chickens and perturbing the goats.

As they brushed their teeth before bed, Sonic bumped Jojo’s arm. “So, um, I think tomorrow Mom and Dad are gonna give me, like, swimming lessons.”

“Oh ‘eah?” she asked around her toothbrush.

“Yeah.” He kept his eyes on the toothpaste tube, squeezing out just a little too much. “Figured it could be worth a try.”

“‘At’s awesome, ‘ude!”

His smile was shy. “Yeah?”

“Mmhmm!” She rinsed, spat into the sink. “Totally! Oh man, tomorrow’s gonna rock!”

As he closed his eyes that night, he thought to himself that maybe she was right.

A thunderous knocking at the front door startled the house awake sometime around midnight. Kids bolted up in bed, and while Sonic was at the door first, Knuckles bodily pushed him behind, and they filed out of the room from oldest to youngest.

Tom and Big T were already at the door when they got downstairs, each armed with a poker from the fireplace.

“Go back to your room,” Tom hissed.

“No way,” Sonic said.

“Agreed.” Knuckles clenched fist crackled with red electricity. “We will not abandon you, Father.”

“Guys!” Maddie called from the top of the stairs. “Stand down! I think that’s *Wade’s* cruiser in the driveway.”

The current and former sheriff exchanged a look.

“He’s *your* deputy,” Big T sighed.

Tom’s whole body seemed to deflate as he lowered the fire poker and stood on tiptoe to peek out the little window in the door. “For God’s sake…” He flipped the deadbolt and opened the door. “What the hell, Wade?”

To Be or Not to Be a Wachowski

Chapter Summary

In which a long-anticipated envelope is opened.

The deputy could barely get a word out, struggling to finish his garbled strings of sentences. “Saw a-” he said. “Saw a- and then- and you-”

“*Wade!”*

“You wouldn’t pick up your phone!”

“Wouldn’t-!” Tom threw up his hands, storming into the house, Wade following behind to stand just in the doorway. “You came *all the way here* because we didn’t pick up our phone! You do know what a *vacation* is, right?”

“I *know* that!”

“And!” Tom pointed towards the door, “you took the *cruiser!* God, Wade, they’re gonna think someone stole it!”

“I didn’t think that far ahead!”

“Oh really?”

Maddie grabbed Tom’s arm. “Listen, Wade. Not that it’s not *great* to see you here-”

“Speak for yourself,” Sonic muttered behind her.

“-but we’re on vacation. So whatever’s going on in Green Hills can wait. I’m sure that you can handle anything there on your own. Right, Tom?”

“After this stunt-”

“*Right, Thomas?”*

“Right. Yes. Right. So right.”

Wade shook his head, adrenaline still running high. “You don’t get it! It’s not police business! It’s-” he looked down at his empty hands, as if suddenly remembering something. “Aw shit.”

“*Wade.*”

“Gimme a second!” There was a furious scramble back out to the cruiser, the family gathering on the front stoop to watch him, still rubbing sleep out of their eyes. Tails had all but given up trying to stay awake and was in Rosie’s arms, looking a fair mix of annoyed and exhausted.

“Five bucks says he came here to drop off a file,” said Tom.

“I’ll take that bet,” said Sonic, yawning.

Wade’s upper half was shoved into the police cruiser's open passenger window, rooting around through candy wrappers and chip bags, until, with a victorious cry of *ah-ha!* he withdrew, holding something up above his head.

It was a little hard to see through the dim porch light, the family squinting towards the still posing deputy.

And then Maddie drew in a sharp breath, nearly stumbling forward. “*Is that*-”

“You told me to look out for it!” Wade trotted towards them, holding out the white envelope. “And it *came* . And when you didn’t answer your phone-”

Before he could finish he was rushed into the house by the entire pack of people, locking the door behind them and herding him towards the kitchen. There was a litany of exclamations - *Oh God* and *Is that what I think it* and *I can’t believe it actually*- before all of them were standing around the kitchen table, the white packet sitting in the center.

There was a long beat of silence, all of them staring at the white packet. The white packet stared back at them.

“Should we wait until morning?” Rosie pulled her robe a little tighter around herself.

Tom struggled for an answer. “I dunno, Ma’.”

“This is a good thing, right,” said Wade. “This is a *good thing*.”

“We don’t know,” said Maddie. “They promised us an answer. We didn’t-” She stopped herself, finally looking down at Knuckles, standing stiffly beside her. She quickly kneeled down, grabbing his shoulders. “Baby, listen. We don’t have to open this now, okay? We can wait until we’re back if you want.”

The echidna looked at the envelope on the table, chewing his bottom lip.

“It’s up to you,” she told him.

“I-” He shut his eyes, lowered his head. “I know that delaying will not change the outcome, but I-” He swallowed hard, shoulders shaking. “I am afraid.”

He felt someone take his hand and opened his eyes. Sonic was standing beside him. “Being brave doesn’t mean you can’t still be afraid of something. And it doesn’t mean you have to take anything on alone.”

Knuckles sniffed, and felt Tom reach out to pet his head. “A Wachowski Family Special?”

“You know it,” Tom said.

He nodded. “Very well. Let us see what my fate is to be.”

Tom and Maddie nodded, both reached for the envelope, and then drew back.

“Do you want to-”

“You could-”

“Maybe you should-”

“Oh just give it here,” Rachel said, stretching across the opposite side of the table. “If I’ve gotta be awake at this hour, I’m gonna *do* something.” With purpose, she ripped the top of the envelope and extracted the stack of papers.

As her eyes flitted over the pages, Sonic squeezed Knuckles’ hand. Tom and Maddie each put a hand on his shoulder.

“Well,” she huffed at last. “It’s about *damn time*.”

The hands on his shoulders dug in hard, but Knuckles barely felt it. His whole body felt numb. “You- you mean…?”

His aunt laid the papers down on the table. “You’re in, kiddo.”

His knees gave out and he crumpled to the floor, pulling his parents and brother along with him.

There was a raucous noise around them; shrieking and screaming enough to wake up the far away neighbors a half mile away, the walls practically vibrating. The boy in the center of it all couldn’t seem to join in, stuck still on the floor until he was tackled by his two brothers, pinning him to the ground.

“You’re in!” Tails shrieked, over and over. “You’re in! You’re *in!*”

“I knew it!” said Sonic, face pressed hard against Knuckles’ shoulder. There was a wetness there, building up beneath Knuckles’ fur. “I *knew* you’d get it!”

“I-”

“Oh, baby!” Maddie was gathering them all up. “ *My* babies!”

“Mom, he’s in!”

“I know!” She was crying, not bothering to wipe away her face, split hard by a smile. “I *know*, sweetheart.”

“He’s *in!*”

“He is,” said Tom, wide awake and grabbing hold of all of them, the five Wachowskis huddled together in a pile on the floor.

Rosie stood on the side with Big T, waiting somewhat patiently for their turn to grab hold of their grandchildren. Before they could try and wriggle their way in, she looked over towards Rachel. “Hold on - what did you mean *it’s about time* ?”

Rachel’s face flushed, and she shrugged. “I might’ve made a few calls.”

Knuckles’ head popped out of the pile, Tom and Maddie peering over his head to look at her. “Rach,” said Maddie. “You didn’t…”

“My ex owed me,” she explained. “They might’ve been able to touch Knuckles with their stupid loopholes, but they couldn’t touch *me* . It was my wedding they faked. They would’ve had a whole fraud and endangering citizens suit on their hands if they’d even tried. Talked to a lawyer about it and everything.”

“*Rachel*.” Tom struggled out of the group hug to pull his sister-in-law close. She froze a moment before returning it. “You have *no idea* what this means. Thank you. Just- *thank you*.”

“Family’s gotta stick together, Thomas. I’ve been on the sidelines a little too long, don’t you think?”

Sonic wriggled his way out to give her a hug around the legs, Tails quickly following behind, and Rosie and Big T finally took their chance to grab up Knuckles.

“You were always our grandbaby,” she whispered against the top of his head. “But this is the best kinda bonus, huh?”

Still speechless, all Knuckles could do was nod.

It took a little while to peel everyone off each other. Knuckles had yet to find any words, holding firmly onto Maddie’s pajama shirt, following her about like a duckling while they rounded up the kids and found Wade blankets and spare pajamas from Tom’s suitcases to set him up on the couch.

Tails and Sonic were nearly beyond wrangling, jumping up and down chanting *one of us, one of us*.

“I can’t believe you drove all the way out here,” Tom said, stacking pillows on the coffee table as Wade came back from brushing his teeth.

“I don’t know why I did it, man.”

“I don’t know either.” Tom clapped him on the shoulder, not hiding the way his eyes shone. “But I’m glad you did.”

“Yeah. Me too.” He grinned. “So. Wachowski family vacation. Does this mean I’m an official family member now?”

“Goodnight, Wade.”

“Should I start calling you Dad, or is this more of a weird cousin thing?”

“*Goodnight, Wade*.”

Maddie was already upstairs, all but given up on trying to put the kids to sleep again. Sonic and Tails were practically jumping off the walls, and Knuckles had yet to say a single word, still trailing behind her, one gloveless hand clutching onto hers.

“*We should make pancakes!”* Sonic was saying, grabbing Knuckles into a hug, Knuckles’ hand squeezing harder into Maddie’s to keep from losing their hold. “We should make *cake* . We should- we should tell *everyone!* Knuckles, you’re my brother!” He was crying again, smile bright enough to keep the sun down.

“He was always your brother, honey,” said Maddie, looking grateful when Tom came up the stairs. “A little help here?”

Still crying, still laughing, Sonic was all but a blur when Tom reached down to pick him up. It didn’t deter the boy whatsoever, and he pressed his face against his Dad’s shirt. “He’s my brother,” he said, muffled through the fabric. “*We’re all yours*.”

“You are.” Tom offered his hand to Tails. “I’m thinking we go somewhere else that won’t keep Jojo up.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” said Maddie.

The somewhere else they picked was the swinging daybed in the screen porch, with Knuckles in the middle, parents and brothers flanking him. With the fireflies putting on a show in the yard, Tom rocked them all slowly.

“What a day,” he sighed, leaning his head back.

“What a *good* day,” Maddie agreed. “And it’s only 1 AM.” With one hand, she scritched the fur atop Knuckles’ head. “Think how much more good is still left.”

He sniffled.

“...Baby?”

He drew in a shuddering breath and-

-as the dam finally broke-

-dissolved into tears.

“Oh, baby…”

She and Tom wrapped their arms around him, murmuring soft reassurances, and let him weep.

Tails slipped down from his spot beside Maddie and climbed up next to Sonic, the pair of them holding each other, waiting to be needed.

In between racking sobs, Knuckles tried to apologize, and was hushed.

Sonic, his own eyes wet again, stroked Tails' back, soothing them both.

None of them knew how long it took, or cared really, but eventually the sobs subsided, replaced by wet, shaky breathing. "I-"

"It's alright," Maddie murmured.

"I am *not* unhappy."

"We know," Tom said.

The echidna swiped at his eyes, rubbed at his chest. "It's like a… a yoke has been lifted from my shoulders… that I had not even known I was carrying."

Maddie kissed his temple. "We know, honey. We *know* ."

"I went through it," said Tails helpfully.

Sonic peered over, still moving his hand up and down Tails' back. "Me too. You'll feel like it's not real for a while."

"I feel that now."

"That's what we're here for. To remind you."

Knuckles nodded, wiping his eyes. "So… so what now?"

"Now we finish up our vacation," said Maddie softly. "And when we're back, we're going to go to the courthouse and finish signing all the right papers and get approval from the judge, and that'll be it."

"And… I will be yours?"

"Oh, baby," said Maddie. "You were always mine. You were always *ours*."

"Oh…" He wiped at his face again. "This still does not feel real."

Sonic finally moved over enough to grab his eldest brother's hand. "It's real."

"Tell me once more?"

"It's *real*."

Knuckles nodded, dragging in a long breath. "I do not know if I will be able to sleep again tonight." He touched his chest. "My heart sounds much like yours, brother. Do you feel like this always? It is *terrible*. How do you sleep?"

“Eh, I get around to it.”

He rubbed his chest again. “I do not know how.”

Tom looked at his watch, pulling a face. “Yikes. If we want to get back in the water tomorrow, we’d better at least get a little sleep in.” He twisted around to look at Sonic. “First swim as a family - that’s gotta be something, bud.”

Knuckles, still rubbing at his chest, looked surprised. “You wish to get in the water?”

“I thought I’d try a little. Yeah…”

“Even though you are afraid?”

Sonic’s shoulders folded in. “Yeah.”

Knuckles squeezed his hand. “Bravery runs through this family, it would seem.”

Tails nodded, leaning against Sonic’s side. “ *Yeah* it does. You’ll have *so* much fun, Sonic. Oh my god, we can take you paddleboarding, and jumping off the bluffs, and-”

“One step at a time, bud,” said Tom. “Don’t wanna scare him off before he even starts.”

“Yeah,” agreed Sonic, looking a little pale around the muzzle. “Can’t practice all that cool stuff if I’m dead.”

Knuckles shook his head. “Impossible. I would not let you drown.”

“… I know.”

“As you should, brother.”

There was little use going back to their own beds, and Wade was already passed out on the couch. Sleep was not going to come easy, but Maddie and Tom at least tried to settle the three of them down.

What eventually did the trick was a gentle rock of the swing accompanied by Tom’s quietly singing John Denver. By the third chorus of the second song all three boys and Maddie were asleep. Tom let his head fall back. His best friend and his boys, all jammed together while the crickets kept time with the swing. It really couldn’t get much better.

And they still had three days of vacation to go.

Swimming Lessons

Chapter Summary

In which a hedgehog takes to water, this time with backup.

“You’re not gonna let go, right?”

“Of course not,” Tom said.

“Never,” Knuckles said.

“You do realize that you’re not even actually touching the water yet, right?” Tails said, already waist-deep and waiting.

Beside him, clear, warm water only hitting her shins, Maddie shaded her eyes with her hand. “Just one step at a time, Blueberry. You’ve got this.”

“You can turn around if you want to,” Tom added helpfully. “We brought some extra books, and I’m sure Grandma would love to hear about your comics.”

Grandma Rosie flapped her hand above the romance novel she was devouring. “Uh huh. Whatever you say, Tommy.”

Sonic squirmed, feet digging into the sand. “No- no I got this.”

“If you have forgotten how to walk, I can show you.” Knuckles stepped forward, Sonic staying firmly in place. “You see. You activate these muscles to- you’re not doing it. Father-”

“Give him a minute, Knuckles.”

Knuckles sighed, but did at least wait, ankle deep in the water.

“So…” Sonic looked over towards his Mom. “How deep are we going?”

“As deep as you want, honey.”

“Oh. Um. Okay. And you won’t push me or throw me or anything?”

Tom dipped down. “Course not, bud.”

“Right. Got it. Okay, then.” He shuffled forward. It wasn’t bad ankle deep, or even shin deep, but he paused when he was closer to his mother and Tails, the water hitting his waist.

A little ways past, Jojo sat on her paddleboard, watching and waiting.

Knuckles turned to the youngest brother. “Can you float at this depth?”

“Hmm? Oh sure!” To demonstrate, Tails flopped onto his back with a little splash, using both tails to move in a circle around Maddie’s legs. “Why?”

“Sonic, you are nearly as light as he is,” Knuckles explained. “We could attempt floatation here. Even if you were to sink, you would merely need to sit up to bring your head above water.”

“Not a bad idea,” Tom agreed, giving Sonic’s hand a light shake. “What do you think?”

The hedgehog watched the fox, still swimming in lazy circles around their mother. It looked so *easy*. “What do I do?”

“Release Father’s hand.”

“What? Why?”

“You will need the use of your arms,” Knuckles said. “I will hold you aloft to start. Father could do it, but I often hear him complain about his back and I would not wish him to injure it further.”

Tom rolled his eyes and said to Maddie, “I hate that he’s right.”

She smirked. “Him and his observations.”

“Come, brother.” Knuckles tugged on Sonic’s hand. “I promised I would not let you drown, remember?”

Sonic swallowed. “And if I go under-”

“I will raise you up again.”

It took some effort, but he loosened his grip on Tom’s hand, letting his arm drop to his side. “Okay.”

“Excellent.” In one swift motion, Knuckles had Sonic up in his arms, princess-style.

“Hey!”

“Forgive me the momentary indignity, brother. I thought this would be the simplest way. Now, you must relax.”

“Easy for you to say,” Sonic muttered, sincerely hoping none of the kids who’d recognized them on previous days were watching.

“I am going to lower you into the water now. If you are tense and curled up like this, you will sink.”

“Thanks for the encouragement…”

“You are most welcome! Now, if you will just relax-”

Whatever came next was overlaid by a spluttering hedgehog, sinking almost immediately to the bottom of the sand.

“What did I tell you!” Knuckles lifted him again. “Father, he is *not listening*.”

Tom shook his head, smile barely hidden no matter how much he bit the inside of his cheek. “First time’s always the charm, bud.”

Sonic wiped water out of his eyes. “That wasn’t a charm at all.”

“Yeah, well, you get used it. Here. How about-” To save his back, Tom lowered himself until he was sitting cross legged in the water, holding out his arms. “I’ll just hold you up until you’re ready. How about that?”

“That… could work?”

He wasn’t given much warning, Knuckles lowering him down quicker than he’d expected, but this time there were arms under him. Water just barely crested about him in a moving outline, bobbing up and down. It covered half of his ears, and where it did everything got a whole lot quieter, sounds muffled about him.

“See!” Tom said, voice strange from above the water. “Not so bad.”

They practiced a few more times, Sonic leaning back onto his Dad’s arms, letting himself tip his head back a little more each time. The quiet wasn’t all that bad. There was something meditative about it, like the tapes Maddie played after yoga. With the clouds drifting above them, he could take in a deep breath and just watch everything pass by.

His own voice sounded distorted and trapped in his head when he said, “you can let go now,” and nearly tumbled below the water again when Tom wiggled his fingers.

“Hey-!”

“Let go like two minutes ago, bud.”

“You are an *expert* at floating, Brother!”

Sonic let himself sink, coming up and wiping water off his eyes. “Are we gonna try to go deeper now?”

His Mom grinned. “If you want to.”

The water was a lot less intimidating now, though the darker spots out towards the kayakers still left him with a moment of pause. Then again, no one had actually let him sink, and the danger felt less present than it had before.

“Sure,” he said, trying his best to sound *calm, cool, and collected*. “Why not.”

Jojo paddled closer. “Why don’t you hang on to the side?” she suggested. “And I can take us out a little ways?” That sounded *fine*, so he did. And, with the rest of the family tagging along behind, off they went.

Turns out, he was *not* as calm and cool once his feet couldn’t feel the bottom anymore. The firm hold he’d had on the board was suddenly a rental-deposit-forfeiting, claws-out, death grip and the fur on his back was rising despite being soaked through.

“Sonic?” Jojo asked.

With a flurry of scratching and scrabbling he hoisted himself up onto the board, chest pressed tight to the brightly-colored PVC. “I’m good!” he lied. “Totally great!”

Treading water beside them, Knuckles frowned in concern. “You do not sound either good *or* great.”

“Well that’s just ‘cause you’ve got water in your ears,” Sonic snapped.

Still able to stand at their current depth, Tom and Maddie moved closer. “We can go back,” Tom said. “If you want to.”

He looked at them all, so perfectly calm and fine, and he gritted his teeth. “No. I don’t want to.”

His parents exchanged a look. Then Maddie approached the board. “How ‘bout I hold you? Just until you get comfortable.”

Claws still digging into the plastic, he shook his head. “I might hurt you.”

“I’m sure you won’t.”

“But I-” His muzzle burned. “My claws. I- I can’t get them to retract.”

She reached out and stroked him behind the ears. “I’ll be fine. Not like I don’t get scratched every day at work.”

“You- you’re sure?”

“Absolutely.” She held out her arms. “C’mere, baby. I got you.”

When he still didn’t let go on his own, she eased her hands around his middle, coaxing him up to sitting on the board. He flexed his fingers, trying to push back the embarrassment when his claws stayed firmly out. But then his mother was hoisting him up and into her arms and the mortification faded a bit. He wrapped his arms around her neck, clutching his own elbows, and hooked his ankles around her middle.

“You’re alright,” she cooed in his ear. “I’m not letting go.”

He went to hold tighter, and felt the moment claws scratched skin. “Sorry-” he squeaked, scurrying to let go and maybe push off towards the board again, but she didn’t loosen her

grip.

“Told you, hon. I’ve had worse.”

They stayed there a moment until Tails finally got bored enough to catch hold of Jojo’s board, her whisking them out towards deeper water. Knuckles paddled after them, Tom supervising from his own radius in the water, kicking out when his feet no longer touched the sandy bottom.

“Should we follow them?”

“You’re not gonna let go?”

“I’m not gonna let go.”

It was a little awkward moving forward, and when Maddie’s own feet stopped touching the bottom, Sonic switched places to hold onto her neck, laying across her back like a spiky sort of cape as she leisurely moved along.

He chanced a look below them, seeing only murky green, and held tighter.

“We’re fine,” she assured him, giving his wrist a tap. “Loosen up, baby. Can’t swim if I can’t breathe.”

They weren’t as fast as the others, Sonic’s hold slowing them down, but they did at least keep a good enough pace for him to start relaxing. She must have sensed the change in his hold, because she began interspersing every few strokes with a dip underwater.

The first time he’d scratched at her shoulders, surprised by the sudden wash of green and quiet around him, coming back up and spluttering out water, shaking it out of his ears.

The second and third times were a little easier.

“Go under again,” he asked on the fourth. “Maybe a little deeper. I’m not made of *china*, Mom.”

She snorted, and then dove beneath, coming back up a few seconds later, the two of them spitting out lake water and laughing. There were bits of seaweed in his quills, and she plucked them out, tossing them away.

Out a little further, the other Wachowski kids and Jojo had started their own game to see how far they could jump off the paddleboard, each shrieking and trying to one up the last kids splash.

“Looks like fun, right?”

From where he was still clinging to his mother’s shoulders, he couldn’t help but nod.

“You wanna try?”

His painful silence was enough of an answer.

“How about this,” she offered, trying her best to twist her head back to look her son in the eye. “Why don’t you just *try* to swim over to Dad. And if you feel ready after, you can do some of those stunts with them.”

His nails tapped along her collarbone, and she could feel his heartbeat picking up to a whir against her back.

“I’ll swim right next to you,” she added, reaching up to grab his wrist, giving it a squeeze. “Me and Dad’ll both be here if you need anything.”

“And-” he swallowed, throat bobbing against the back of her neck. “And nothing’ll happen to me?”

“Do you think we’d let anything happen to you?”

It was a fair point, but his arms trembled anyway.

She gave his wrist another squeeze before calling out, “Hey! Tom!”

Her husband looked away from the other kids (Tails throwing up his hands - “*Dad you’re supposed to watch me do a flip!”*) and began to swim over towards his wife and son. “Look at you, so far out!” he said cheerfully. “How you feeling?”

“Oh, you know, like a sixty-forty split between having fun and terrified.”

“We were thinking of trying something new,” Maddie said. “And actually, I think we might need one more spotter. Knuckles!”

The echidna answered “Yes?” from midair, splashing down hard, sending the paddleboard rocking on the waves as he resurfaced.

“I think you’re the strongest swimmer we’ve got,” Maddie said. “Can you lend a hand?”

“I can lend both hands.” He paddled over quickly. “What are we attempting?”

“Sonic’s going to try and swim from me to Dad,” she explained. “But I need you to be ready if he goes under. Okay?”

“Of course, Mother.” He pounded his chest with a fist, splashing them all unintentionally.

“That’s a big step, bud!” Tom wiped water off his face. “Look at you, getting ready to swim already!”

“Yeah, well,” Sonic clung tighter. “Not sure if I’m gonna swim or just *sink*.”

“That’s what your brother’s for.”

Tom swam a good few feet away, coming a little closer at Sonic’s insistence.

“You ready?” Maddie began to pry his hands off her neck.

“Um-”

“Just keep those legs moving and you’ll be fine,” she assured him, holding him beneath the arms while he considered his options; swimming out to his dad or clinging for dear life to his Mother.

Off to the side, there was a gaggle of kids glancing over every so often between their own games, diving under the water and splashing one another with pool noodles they’d brought along.

“Keep my legs moving,” he said, forcing himself to look away from the other kids, reputation hanging over his head. “Got it. Legs moving.”

“You must also move your arms,” Knuckles said. “Optimally all four limbs at once.”

“Gotta make it more complicated, don’t’cha?” Sonic griped.

“Don’t think too hard about it,” Maddie said.

“Too late.”

She pulled one arm away, treading water and working not to tip over with his weight centered in one spot.

“Mom…”

“I’m gonna let go,” she said. “Dad’s *right* there. And Knuckles is too. You got this.”

He swallowed. “I got this.”

She let go.

He sank instantly.

Knuckles dove, quickly bringing him back to the surface. “You forgot to move your limbs, brother.”

“Oh, right,” Sonic spluttered, spitting out water. “Knew it was *something*.”

“I’ve got a better idea,” Tom said. “Let’s go back to where we can stand.”

They eased their way back to slightly shallower water, Sonic riding on Knuckles’ shoulders. Tom shouted to the group on the blanket, and a moment later, Wade was joining them in the water, a small boogie board in hand.

“Thanks, man.”

“Anytime, Brokowski.”

“That really gonna be a thing now?”

“You know it.”

“Fine.” Tom took the boogie board and held it out to Sonic. “Let’s do one set of limbs first. I want you to hang onto this, and just kick with your legs. See if you can get moving. Can you do that, bud?”

“I think so.”

“Of course you can,” Knuckles said, taking the board from Tom and holding it over his shoulder for Sonic to take.

The hedgehog put a hand on it. It bobbed in the water in his grip. “This is gonna hold me up?”

“Yup,” Tom nodded. “Give it a try.”

“Okay.”

“You must let go of me in order to do this, brother.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

“I can feel your claws digging into my shoulder.”

“Sorry.”

“It is fine. I have extraordinarily tough skin.”

“Not when it comes to the *tingly feelings*.”

At that, Knuckles plunged beneath the water, leaving Sonic with only the board to hang on to.

“Hey!”

Knuckles resurfaced a foot or so away. “Your attempt to distract me from my mission with your teasing was *un*successful, brother.”

“Whatever you say, Captain Hormones.”

“*Boys*.” Maddie splashed at them. “Less arguing, more swimming.”

It was an awkward sort of paddle back and forth, and Sonic felt like he was doing more splashing than swimming, but when he started moving forward (*meaningfully splashing*, as his Dad called it) there was something invigorating about it all.

They practiced putting the board under his stomach after that, getting him to scoop with his hands, flailing his arms around until he found a pattern that worked.

It was around that point that Sonic stood, shaking water off his quills. “I think we can try it out there again.”

“Don’t feel like you have to rush anything.” Maddie sat in the water, leaning back to get some sunshine on her face. Tails had taken to sitting on Tom’s shoulders, jumping off whenever he got bored, scaling their father again like a jungle gym. “We’ve got two more days at the lake, and there are swimming holes back home. You won’t be missing out.”

“I know, Mom. But I *got* this.”

Which was how they ended up back in the deeper areas of water once more, Tom off a distance, Knuckles waiting in case he was needed.

“Just remember!” Tom called over, treading water below the surface to better cup his hands around his mouth. “Don’t panic! Kick with your legs, scoop with your arms!”

“I *know*!” Sonic rolled his eyes, hoping it disguised how quick his heart was beating.

Not that he could hide it from Maddie, who felt it against her arms and stopped to scratch him between the ears. “Just call me if you need me.”

“Can’t do that if I’m *dying*, Mom.”

“You could win an Oscar with that kind of drama.”

“Are you gonna do it or not!” Tails flew just above, waiting with his arms crossed. “Come *on!* I wanna take you to jump off stuff!”

“Patience, Brother!” Knuckles called up to their youngest.

“Alright,” Sonic dragged in a breath. “Ready.”

He felt the moment his Mom’s hands left him. Like before, he dropped below first. For a moment, he panicked, flailing and kicking out before finally remembering the patterns that had helped him out so much before. Moving his legs and his arms with a mostly coordinated rhythm, enough that his head crested the water again.

“There you go!” Tom was waving his arms, pumping his fists in the air. “You got it!”

“You’re doing great!” Maddie beamed.

“Just like riding a bike!” Tom called across the water.

“I don’t know *how* to ride a bike!” Sonic hollered back.

“That’s next on the list,” Tom said. “One thing at a time.”

“Sure,” Sonic grunted, brow still furrowed in concentration. “Let’s just pile on *more* things I can humiliate myself doing.”

“Oh there’s more?” Tom was grinning, eyes on Sonic even as Tails lowered himself to perch on his shoulders. “Like what?”

“M’not telling you!”

“Ah, that’s alright. I’ll figure ‘em out.” One-handed, he tossed a giggling Tails back into the water. “Gotta have some good stories to tell your prom date after all.”

“Why you-” Sonic swiped out a hand and hit Tom with a splash. “I oughta-”

He paused, blinking.

He was *close enough* to splash Tom.

Irritation melted away as he let out a disbelieving laugh. “I did it!”

“You did it!” Tom caught the boy around the middle. “Told ya you could!” He gave Maddie a look across the water, holding onto a breathlessly happy child.

Maddie turned, Jojo paddling over on her board. The two exchanged words and Jojo pulled a waterproof camera from the little drawstring bag on her back.

Before Sonic could notice, Tom gave the child a shake. “You wanna try it again?”

“Hell yeah!” Sonic said.

His parents were too happy to remind him about the language.

Savoring the Moment

Chapter Summary

In which everyone basks in the good times.

When noon hit, it took an inordinate amount of cajoling to get the boys out of the water and back to the blanket. But at last they managed it, all three boys shaking themselves dry before anyone could remind them not to.

There were laughing shrieks from the adults who had, until that moment, been perfectly dry.

“What’d I say about that?” Maddie chided halfheartedly.

“That it was for outside only,” Sonic reminded her.

“And we *are* outside,” Tails said, significantly fluffier than the other two.

Maddie sighed, smiling. “Got me there. Sorry ‘bout that guys.”

“Oh, no harm done,” Rosie said, putting her water-speckled book down under her chair. “You boy must be starving after all that hard work.”

Knuckles and Tails went straight to the cooler, but Sonic zipped to his grandmother’s side. “Didja see me out there?”

“I *did!* Given’ that Aquaman fella a run for his money!”

He fell into her arms, beaming. “It was so *awesome!*”

“*So* awesome,” she echoed, hugging him tight.

“I got pictures!” Jojo said, coming to plop her wet self in her mother’s lap.

“Told you that thing was worth the money,” Rachel told her.

Maddie settled down in her chair. “Let me see!” She went through them, showing each off to Rosie and Sonic and Tom when he joined them. “Aw, these are *great*, Jojo. You’ll need to send those our way! More for the wall.”

“And we need copies,” Rosie reminded her.

Sonic grinned, looking over towards his mother. His smile fell. “Aw, Mom.” He moved to her side, gently reaching out to touch the scratch marks on her shoulders. “Sorry…”

“Honey, I’m *fine*.” She took his hands, giving them a squeeze. “I’ve had worse. And if anyone asks at work, I’ll tell them that I saved a whole bunch of cats.”

He stepped from foot to foot. “You sure?”

“*Positive*.” She gave his knuckles a noisy kiss. “Now how about we actually try to eat something before we get back out there.”

There was a scramble for sandwiches, and they sat on the towel, munching at chips and apples. The adrenaline from the lake had worn off enough that Knuckles’ excitement from the early morning came back with a vengeance, and he made sure to tell everyone who passed by what had happened.

Kayla’s family came back to the beach at around 1, and didn’t hesitate to come when the echidna called her over.

“Kayla of Colorado! I have *exciting news!”*

Rachel had to put her hands over her ears when the girl began to shriek.

“That’s *amazing!* Are you gonna celebrate!”

“We are,” Maddie answered for Knuckles. “We’ll be doing a little barbeque and s’mores operation. And I think there’s an ice cream store with our name on it.”

“It does not actually bear our name,” Knuckles whispered to Kayla. “Mother is using a phrase. It means-”

“I get it,” Kayla grinned, patting his arm. “That’s *beyond* cool! I can’t believe you’re gonna be *adopted!*”

“Let your parents know that you’re invited, if you guys want to come,” said Tom, tipping up his glasses to look at his son. “If you want them there. Totally up to you, bud.”

“That’s a great idea,” Maddie agreed. “What do you think, Knuckles?”

He must have approved, because he very quickly grabbed Kayla’s arm, speeding them off down the beach to find her parents, her feet very nearly flying out beneath her as she tried to keep up.

“Hey Mom?”

Maddie looked back to Sonic, who had moved to sit near the arm of her chair, smiling as sweetly as he could manage.

“Mmmhm?”

“So Knuckles gets a party for getting adopted, right?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.”

“So, do I get one? I swam a whole ten feet today. That’s at least worthy of a *small* rager.”

“Keep dreaming, kid.”

“A piñata, then.”

“No.”

“Fine. You twisted my arm. I’ll settle for a gift card.”

Maddie flicked his nose and went back to her book.

Sunscreen was reapplied and the kids went back to the water, Knuckles under strict orders not to let Sonic out of his sight. He was proudly vigilant, though a gaggle of long-legged windsurfers did distract him for a moment.

From his beach chair, Tom chuckled. “Oh man, I am *not* ready for this new phase of his.”

Beside him, Wade cracked open a beer (the label conveniently peeled off so the park rangers couldn’t complain). “I should give him some pointers.”

“Please god don’t.”

“Oh come on, you don’t think you’re gonna be able to help him, do you? You’ve been outta the game for, like, twenty years!”

“Yeah, well, you’re not even on the board, man.”

“I’m *so* on the board!”

“When’s the last time you spoke to a woman for longer than five minutes - who *isn’t* your mother.”

“Maddie’s right there!”

“Don’t bring me into this, Wade,” she said from behind her book.

“Okay, well then-”

“No,” said Rosie.

Desperate for some sort of validation, he looked towards Rachel. She threw up her hands. “I guess I’d count.”

“Hah! *See* . One more than my mom, right there.”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Congrats. You’re only slightly less of a loser now.”

“Hear that?” Wade told Tom, grinning. “Stepping up already!”

Beyond Tom's groan, Rachel laughed. Wade took that as enough of an invitation to switch spots, sitting next to her, the two of them chatting, Rachel's book apparently not interesting enough to keep her there.

Maddie took the seat Wade had left empty next to her husband. "Am I really seeing this?"

Tom dug in the cooler for another pair of cans, handing one to her. "We'll see if he actually can keep it up for the whole five minutes."

Maddie popped the top of her can, took a small sip. "If he successfully manages to charm my sister, we might have to let him give pointers to Knuckles."

Tom snorted a laugh. "Not you too."

"I'm just saying," she shrugged, smirking. "*Someone's* got to." She gestured out towards the lake, where Knuckles, in his effort to catch the eye of one of the windsurfer girls, doing one-handed hand-stand pushups on a paddleboard, missed Sonic slipping under the water. He popped up a second later, unphased, but apparently annoyed enough to shove the board and knock his older brother into the water.

"I mean, do we really though?" Tom asked. "We could always just… let him flounder for a year or three."

"You just don't want to have to have anymore sex talks."

"Do you?"

"I want to help our kids be happy."

Tom blinked at her, but her smug smile had him relaxing. "Well, you *are* superior to all," he conceded. "So if anybody's gonna be putting any condoms on bananas, it's gonna be *you*."

She smacked his arm. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"You're the one who said-"

"One step at a time, babe." She took another sip of her beer.

"Maybe he needs another book," Tom said, his smile all snark.

"Don't you mock the book." She wagged a finger at him.

"I would *never*."

From the other side of the blanket, Rachel's laughter rang out again, and they both peered over curiously.

"Well I'll be damned," Maddie said.

"When you do that banana demo, make sure you include Wade."

Tom got another smack on the arm for that.

A Wachowski Vacation for the Books

Chapter Summary

> A short and sweet chapter, in which the First Annual Wachowski Vacation winds down and wraps up.

The rest of vacation passed by almost too quickly.

They went back to the lake on the following day, and Sonic practiced swimming alongside his brothers until he felt confident enough to try jumping off the platform in the middle, braver still when he took to jumping off the smaller bluffs so long as Knuckles stayed waiting in the water just in case.

The group on the sand heard a lot of "did you see me!" followed by the insistence that "you weren't even looking! Look again!"

"This is gonna be your future for a while," Bit T said behind his crossword puzzle.

Tom and Maddie didn't mind.

Rachel and Wade went for a few long walks along the sand, finally exchanging phone numbers and promising to call.

And of course, Knuckles' impending adoption was the source of most of their joy and excitement as the trip wound down. There was barely any room to mourn the end of their vacation with the stack of papers still on the kitchen table for everyone to see. Knuckles looked at it every time he passed, and had taken to calling Maddie and Tom *Legal Mother and Father* whenever it suited him, which Tom tried to explain sounded suspicious to anyone without the context, but Knuckles just replied that *Legal Father needed to learn to appreciate his Legal Son a little bit better*.

On the final day of vacation, Kayla and Dylan's parents invited the Wachowskis and Company to a restaurant on the outskirts of Boulder. The hostess was visibly intimidated when the giant group rolled up, eyes wide at the trio of brightly-colored anthropomorphic aliens, but then Tails opened his mouth, bubbling excitedly about how when they got home they were going to get adopted at last, and she was instantly charmed.

Arms loaded full of menus, she led the group out back, directing busboys to push three tables together at the far end of their expansive patio, next to a fire feature. Both busboys had seen the Eggman fight on Youtube and Sonic reveled in the high-fives they offered.

Their waitress, a bubbly summer hire who wasn't yet out of high school, was also apparently a fan and gushed over the videos she'd seen of the fight in Green Hills.

“It’s just so amazing how much you helped that town!” She twirled her pen around her fingers, rocking on the heels of her hiking boots. “I can’t even believe it! And… and are you helping them?” She looked to the humans.

Sonic answered before they could. “Oh yeah. It’s so hard to find good help these days. I mean, I’m not sure how long they’ll stick around, but don’t let them know that we’re shopping around.”

“Untrue!” Knuckles pushed Sonic a little too hard, and he tipped over into Tom. “They are our *guardians*, as we are the guardians of this world! Please ignore the ramblings of my lesser brother. He is mostly always wrong.”

The waitress laughed, and Knuckles’ face flushed. “I… do not think it was funny,” he whispered to Maddie.

“It was,” she assured him. “She thought it was *charming*.”

Knuckles’ face went even redder.

Sonic just rolled his eyes.

Kayla, across the table, went similarly red, and leaned forward to whisper something to Knuckles.

Tails and Sonic wrinkled their noses. “What are they doing?” they asked Tom

He took a sip of beer. “I think they’re taking bets?”

“About *what*?”

“About what she likes.”

“Gross,” said Sonic. “I’m never gonna do that.”

“Music to my ears, sweetheart,” said Maddie, though she grinned when Knuckles noticed another girl a few tables over and slid down in his chair.

Food was shared and divided up. Tom let Sonic have a sip of beer, and he quickly stuffed his mouth with bread to get the taste out. Dylan and Tails sat next to one another and traded cards under the table, ticking off the most powerful ones they had, showing them off to the adults, who oohed and aahed as if they understood.

Halfway through the meal, a band set up on the other end of the patio, covering songs that Tom considered classics and Sonic considered oldies. Wade convinced Rachel to dance with him to a Van Morrison song, and Jojo announced to the table that he was a marked improvement over her mom’s last choice in boyfriends. Tom and Maddie got up for a Queen song, followed by Kayla and Dylan’s parents.

Over the back of his chair, Knuckles watched them.

“D’you dance?” Kayla asked.

He shook his head.

“You wanna try?” At his quizzical expression, she shrugged. “I mean, you’ll hafta eventually. Might as well get some practice in.”

“If you say so.” He let her lead him off in the direction of their parents.

“Mushy stuff,” Sonic muttered. “He’s gonna be un*bear* able when school starts again.”

Rosie laughed and flicked his ear.

The end of the night came with Kayla and Knuckles hugging, promising to call and text, Dyllan trading his phone number for Tails’, cackling about something that went over everyone’s heads.

They spent the night packing, knowing that the trip was coming to a close. It took them well until 11 pm, and all of them sat in the living room once they were done with their frantic scramble, the bags packed and ready by the door.

“Well,” Tom said, Maddie on one side, Tails on the other. “First Wachowski vacation. How’d we do?”

“You did good, Tommy,” said Big T, Rosie agreeing from where she was leaning against him, his arm around her shoulder.

“We’d come again,” said Rachel.

“Totally,” said Jojo. “This was the *best*.”

Wade sighed, tilting his head back. “Can I get invited to your vacations from now on? My family isn’t as fun as yours.”

Sonic, sitting in front of Tom, tipped his head back. “It wasn’t Disney,” he said. “But it was alright, I guess.” But his smile betrayed him. Knuckles punched Sonic’s shoulder.

“I will say what my brother is too cowardly to admit-”

“Hey!”

“This was a wonderful celebration of our familial bonds, and it was an honor and a joy to take part.”

Sonic opened his mouth, struggling to find the words, finally settling on, “yeah… what he said.”

“And,” said Maddie, reaching out to smooth down his quills, “I’d say it was made better with all of the news we got.”

Knuckles nodded, twisting around to lock his arms around her middle.

“Can’t wait to see that, finally. Jojo and I are ready with to fly back whenever you guys are ready to head to the courthouse.” Rachel gave Sonic a look. “I didn’t get to see your adoption. And… I’m sorry about that. I should’ve been a better Aunt then ”

He smiled kindly at her. “We can pretend we’re doing it again, if that helps.” He dipped his head backwards again to Tom and Maddie. “Unadopt me.”

“I don’t think we can do that, hon.”

“You totally can! Come on. Just- *unadopt* me.”

Maddie rolled her eyes. “Fine.” She waved her hand around like a wand, *whapping* it down between his eyes. “There. You’re unadopted.”

“*Yes*.” He turned back to Rachel. “See? Easy as that.”

His Aunt pulled him into a side hug, laughing. “You’re one of a kind, you know that, kid?”

Lost for a snappy quip, he pressed his face against her side, grin set for the rest of the night.

They said goodbye in the early hours, before the sun was up. Giant pots of coffee were brewed and the house was locked, key left under the mat. Wade took the police cruiser and all of the leftover snacks that no one else wanted. Rosie and Big T distributed hugs to their very sleepy grandkids and Jojo (who was an honorary grandbaby as far as they were concerned) before getting into Rachel and Jojo’s car to carpool to the airport.

“We’ll be able to fly soon,” Maddie whispered to the group of sluggish kids they’d dragged out of bed before 5 in the morning, helping to buckle a sleeping Tails in.

There was little more than grunts in reply, Maddie settling in the driver's seat for the first half of their drive.

“I’d say this was a success, don’t you?” Tom said, kicking up his feet on the dash, leaning back to try to get a few hours of sleep before it was his turn at the wheel.

Maddie nodded, pulling onto the road again. In the rearview mirror, she could see their three boys already asleep again, breathing slow and even.

Just behind them, in the trunk, the approval for adoption sat just inside her backpack. “I’d say so. Yeah.”

Tom’s reply was a snore.

She was fine with the silence, choosing a classical music playlist, turning the car onto the main highway; one of the many roads that would bring them home.

Adoption Day

Chapter Summary

Adoption Day Arrives!!!

The adoption date was set to be a Monday afternoon in August; chosen precisely to allow Jojo and Rachel to attend, since Jojo would still be off school. Sonic protested, mostly because he'd been hoping to *miss* a few days of school but was told that there was no chance of that.

"Being unadopted is the *worst*," he bemoaned, flopping back onto the couch.

"You know you're not actually-"

"The *woooooOOOoorst!"*

Maddie just rolled her eyes.

Invitations were sent after being decorated by Tails and Knuckles.

Kayla and Dylan couldn't fly out, but arrangements were made for them to Zoom in.

Artie was shutting down the diner for the evening specifically to host the private Gotcha Day party, a banner proudly swagged across the chrome front overhang, telling everyone in town what day it was (as if they weren't already aware). Carl had volunteered to set up some of his old bear traps in case the Sterlings decided to try and make trouble, and was politely declined.

Wade had spent the rest of the summer riding his bicycle on patrol (having lost cruiser privileges for putting over a thousand miles on it driving to Boulder and back), and spent the week leading up to the event telling everyone he'd slimmed down on purpose because his long-distance girlfriend was coming to town.

The whole town had an air of joy about it.

Everyone was ready.

Except, it seemed, the ones who were the reason for it all.

"Guys!" Tom called up the open attic stairs. "We gotta get moving; what's the hold up, hmm?"

"Mom's the hold up!" Sonic called back down. "Ack! Hey! Do something about your wife!"

Chuckling, Tom climbed the stairs in his summer suit (a light blue number Maddie called his Miami Vice Uniform). He hefted himself up into the attic bedroom and found himself surrounded by chaos.

Maddie was sitting on the desk chair in her pale yellow sundress, one leg hooked around Sonic's middle, holding him in place as she smoothed back his quills back.

"Mooooom, it's fine, quit it," Sonic whined. He was half-dressed in the suit Rosie had bought him for his own adoption ceremony, the jacket hanging from the bedpost and the tie still unknotted.

"You had a bath last night. You get fluffy after a bath. Hold still."

"I *like* being fluffy! And that stuff smells *girly!* " Sonic tried to pull away again, but was pulled back, Maddie grabbing the bottle of animal fur oil she kept on hand.

"It smells *fine*. Hold still."

"Thomas, your wife is trying to *kill me!"*

"You're the one who wanted to be readopted. Gotta dress the part."

"Fine! I take it back!"

"Too late."

"And even if you *weren't*," said Maddie, combing more of the oil through his fur, trying to make sure it got onto his skin, you'd *still* be wearing this because it's *charming*."

"Daaaaaa*aaaaad*."

"You're on your own here, bud," he said, and went over to Knuckles, who was staring at his tie, limply held in his hand.

"Why must we strangle ourselves for the sake of appearance, Father? I do not understand."

"Welcome to Earth customs, bud." He lay the tie around Knuckles' neck, looping it into a knot that he slid upwards.

"I am not from Earth. You should follow *my* customs."

"Which are…?"

"We will dance around a fire to celebrate our union as a family-"

"That actually sounds-"

"-and wear the skulls of our fallen enemies!"

"Yeah, okay, that's not… we're not doing that."

Knuckles huffed, and dramatically choked when the knot was secured just at the base of his neck, tugging it down when Tom turned around to help Tails, who'd come up behind with his own tie in hand. "It's not really Mom's fault we're running late," he said, standing straight and tall. "Sonic could've gotten oiled after bath last night like we did, but he didn't want to."

"Traitor," Sonic hissed.

"And I like Earth customs! Clothes are fun sometimes. I like our pajamas, and the swimsuits we got to pick out." As Tom worked on his tie, the fox turned to Knuckles. "It's a way humans express themselves! You're tribe did that, didn't they? With things that *weren't* skulls?"

The echidna nodded. "I suppose so. Still. This constricting noose is *not* how I would prefer to express myself."

"It's just for an hour or two," Tom said, finishing the knot on Tails' tie. "Once we get to the party, you can take it off."

Sonic finally got free of Maddie, fur smoothed down and less puffed out than before. "I'd like to reiterate, *Thomas*, that I'm just there to observe. I don't need all the… fancy stuff."

"Uh uh," Tom kneeled, poking his nose. "You're the one who was nice enough to say that Aunt Rachel could see you readopted."

"It was a *sentiment*."

"And that sentiment comes with paperwork that we sent the judge last night."

"You're kidding me."

Tom took out his phone. "Your Mom drafted it and everything."

"And I did a *great job* " Maddie added, tying back her hair.

Sonic squinted at the screen. "We hereby decree that Sonic Wachowski is still Sonic Wachowski, and we still love him very, very much, even when he steals Dad's hidden snacks from the glovebox and gives his vegetables to Ozzie." Despite himself, he grinned. "This is so dorky…"

"Takes one to know one," said Maddie, reaching out to drag him into another hug, nuzzling his face when he laughed through his protests of *Mom, stop!* peppering his face with noisy kisses. She stopped only to say, "Can't wait to adopt you again, Blueberry."

He ducked his head, butting it against the underside of her chin in a move she'd seen from clients on her veterinary table. She'd smell like lavender oil all day, but she didn't mind.

The moment was broken by Tom dangling the tie between them. "Tick tock."

"Father, this is hardly the time for frivolous social media," Knuckles said, tugging at the hem of his suit jacket.

Maddie laughed, and got to her feet. “Why don’t we go load up the car? Tom, you think you can handle lassoing one more boy?”

“Totally,” Tom said. Eyes on his wife, his hand shot out and caught Sonic by the collar as the boy took a chance at escaping.

“Perfect. C’mon guys.” Maddie ushered Knuckles and Tails down the ladder, and the attic grew quiet.

Tom looked down at Sonic, who had stopped trying to get away. “Big day.”

“More for them.” The hedgehog jerked a thumb at the ladder.

“For everyone.” Tom got down on one knee and slipped the tie around his son’s neck. “Now listen,” he said slowly, eyes on the silk as he knotted it carefully. “I know I’m probably gonna say this a hundred times today, but I want to say it now before I get too weepy.”

“You? Cry? No way,” Sonic teased, but his eyes were shining.

Tom drew the knot up just tight enough, making sure it was perfectly straight. “You know your Mom and I love you all *so* much.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And we’d adopt you all *fifty* times over if we had to.”

“Seems excessive.”

Tom’s laugh was wet, and he caught the boy’s cheeks in his hands. “Maybe. But we’d do it. Not a day that goes by that I don’t thank everyone and everything that you crashed through our garage window.”

“Dad…”

Tom leaned in, pressed a kiss to his son’s forehead. “Yeah, yeah. King of Sap over here. You’d think you’d be used to it by now.” He stood, plucked the little suit jacket from the bedpost, offering it out. “You ready?”

Sonic took the jacket, swung it over one shoulder with a grin. “My middle name is ready.”

“Thought your middle name was 'The'.” Tom started for the stairs.

“Actually,” Sonic caught him by the hand. “You can do stuff like that at the courthouse, right? Change names?”

“I’m not letting your driver’s license say Blue Justice some day.”

“No,” Sonic laughed lightly. “No. It’s just… I mean, what if I wanted my middle name to be a different ‘T’ word?”

“Bud…?”

“‘Cause Thomas starts with a ‘T’.”

“Oh, *bud*.” Tom sat, legs dangling down the ladder opening. “You don’t have to-”

“But what if I *want* to?” the boy asked, radiating nervous sincerity.

Tom used their joined hands to pull Sonic into a tight hug. “And here I thought I wasn’t gonna cry ‘til we got to the courthouse.”

“So I could?”

“*Yes.* Yes of course, Sonic. *God*, bud, I don’t even know what to say.”

“Love you, Dad.” Sonic returned the hug just as hard. “Glad you found me too.”

When they finally made it down to the van, Maddie had all of their party supplies loaded up, and the other two boys buckled in. “There you are! Uh-oh, was somebody getting weepy ahead of schedule?” She greeted her husband with a brush of her thumb across his cheek.

“Are you really surprised?” he asked.

“Nope.” She kissed him sweetly. “S’why I love you. C’mon. Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Show? What show? I thought this was to be a ceremony, not a performance,” Knuckles asked from the backseat.

“Just an expression, Knucklehead,” Sonic told him, climbing up into his booster seat and buckling in.

“Life would be so much easier if Earthlings would just *say* what they meant at all times.”

“Yeah, but not as interesting!” Tails chirped.

Tom slid into the driver’s seat, Maddie at his side. “Alright, fellas! Let’s do this thing!”

With a chorus of cheers from their sons, the van rolled out of the driveway.

Judge Ramirez greeted Sonic and his family with handshakes and nods, and when Sonic sped past her shouting, “round two with the blue!” she didn’t do more than say, “don’t run in my halls, young man.”

Sonic skidded to a shop, having the good sense to look sheepish, and jogged quietly back to his parents.

“I like this woman,” said Knuckles to Maddie. “She is fierce. She would do well as a hunter.”

The entire process was a little anticlimactic. The Judge read something that none of the kids (save for Tails) understood, and asked if they agreed to the terms they'd been read, to which Maddie and Tom responded without hesitation.

"And I understand, young man, that you're looking to do… *this* again."

Sonic nodded. "Yes."

"That's *yes Judge Ramirez* in my chambers, Mr. Wachowski."

At a look from Maddie, he added, "Yes, Judge Ramirez."

"Normally, I don't allow for any sort of *re*-adoption. It's normally never done." She paused, his ears flattening. "Then again, this is not a normal family."

"And proud of it!" Sonic's ears flattened again at her gaze. "Judge Ramirez."

Maddie smoothed down his quills.

"I'd gladly sign this, but I'm afraid it won't have much legal value. You understand that, right?"

"I know," he said. "But I was thinking- I mean I asked my dad- I was thinking of maybe adding a middle name? If I could?"

"We'd have to forward that case to another branch, but I'm sure we can speed things along. Did you have one in mind?"

Sonic slid a gum wrapper across the table towards the judge. She peered over her glasses at the scrawl and smiled. "I think we can make this work."

"Wait," Knuckles was looking between his brother and the judge. "There can be additional names?"

"Not everyone does it," Tom said, "But yeah, lots of people have another name in between their first and last name."

Sonic grinned. "You wanna see what I picked?"

At Knuckles' enthusiastic nod, Judge Ramirez handed over the gum wrapper. He scanned it, eyebrows shooting sky high. "I wish to do this too!"

Ramirez nodded. "Take your father's-"

"No." Knuckles squared his shoulders, standing as tall as he could. "My mother's."

Beside him, Maddie inhaled sharply. "Baby…"

Sonic pursed his lips. "But it's a girl's name."

“No. It is *Mother’s* name. Which makes it superior to all other names.” Without needing to look, he reached out and grabbed her hand. “Besides, the book she bestowed to us states that gender is a social construct. I wish to take the name that will honor the tribe.”

“And you?” The judge looked to Tails. “Any last minute changes I should know about?”

He shook his head, explaining; “I think I’ve got enough names already.”

The Judge wrote down their chosen names, told Maddie and Tom about deposits they’d need to submit for changes and the office she’d send the information to, and the documents were signed.

And that was it.

Rachel and Jojo were in the lobby when they got out. “Look at the Wachowskis!” She kneeled for a group hug, flanked by her nephews. “And looking so *dapper!”*

“Does dapper mean *suffocating?* ” Sonic tugged at the tie.

Rachel fussed with the tie, pulling the knot back up. “Don’t undo it until I get a picture outside.”

“Aunt Rachel-!”

“Ah ah. I don’t want to hear it.” She took his hand. “Come on, Wachowskis! There’s a great spot for a picture on the steps!”

“Mom made me wear the pinchiest shoes,” Jojo whispered, trotting along on Sonic’s other side. “Dress Up stuff is the *worst*.”

“I’ll ditch my stuff in the bathroom at the party if you will.”

“Deal.”

“Until then-” he offered her an arm. “Might I escort you to Green Hills’ most *sumptuous* of dining establishments?”

She fluttered a hand at her chest. “Why thank you, kind sir! I hope you remembered our reservations?”

“Oh *indubitably!* Only the finest of chili dogs and rotating pies for M’Lady!”

Rachel spent way too much time (in Sonic’s opinion) posing them just so on the steps, adjusting ties and jacket lapels and taking Tom’s aviators away from him, but finally she stood back and held up her phone. “Okay! On ‘three’, ready? One… two… Uh, guys? How ‘bout a smile, hmm?”

But the whole family had tensed up, gazes fixed over her shoulder.

“Uh, Mom?” Jojo tugged on the sleeve of her mother’s dress.

Rachel turned.

Commander Walters was standing on the sidewalk in civilian clothes, hands clasped behind his back. A black van was parked across the street in a completely conspicuous attempt at inconspicuousness. A pair of agents, also failing at acting un-agently, were waiting inside the van.

The End is Only The Beginning

Chapter Summary

In which Olive Garden Guy is told exactly where he can stick it, and a party is held.

"Wachowskis!" Commander Walters gave the group his best interpretation of a smile. "We were wondering when you'd get out. Really took your time in there, didn't you?"

Sonic stepped forward, but Knuckles was faster, pushing his brother and Jojo behind him, reaching for Tails with his free arm. Tom, Maddie, and Rachel put themselves between the kids and the officials below the steps.

"Is there something we can help you with, Commander?" Maddie's voice was as pleasant as a stubbed toe, her own grin sharp and careful. "We weren't expecting you to be here."

"And how the hell did you know about this anyway?"

Maddie quickly reached out and grabbed Tom's hand, giving it a squeeze. *Don't*.

"Adoptions are publicly posted, Mr. Wachowski. We're not tracking you too closely. Don't flatter yourself." The hand in Maddie's squeezed tighter. "We were actually just hoping to have a little chat, that's all. Seeing as how you've tied that legal knot." His smile faltered, and from where they stood behind the adults, the group of children could see how much it was paining him. "Congratulations, by the way," he added, voice tight.

"No thanks to *you*," Tom growled.

"Indeed," Walters said. "It seems you've bested us again. Which is why-" He reached into the pouch of his fanny pack and everyone on the steps tensed another ten notches. But all he extracted was an envelope. "I've come not with a threat, but with a proposition." He took a few steps closer, holding the envelope out. When no one moved to take it, he lowered his hand again, opening the envelope himself. "Mrs. Wachowski, back in Hawaii you said that your son was on *our* side. But the world governments get a bit anxious when it comes to vigilantism." He reached into the envelope and pulled out a gleaming golden G.U.N. badge. "I've been ordered to see that the next time they step up and fight, it's sanctioned."

Maddie gaped at him. "You- you're trying to *recruit* our *children*."

"It's only logical," he shrugged easily. "These past few years we've come to realize that we're woefully outgunned against the threats that exist out there in the universe. We're simply trying to level the playing field." He tilted his head, craning to make eye contact with any of the three alien kids. "It only makes sense, doesn't it? And we've got a state-of-the-art facility for you to train in-"

“Hold on,” Tom cut in, side-stepping to cut off the Commander’s view.

“We only want what’s best for the planet, Mr. Wachowski.”

“And what about what’s best for the *kids?*” Maddie demanded, “Who -again- are *kids*. *Our* kids. Last I checked the minimum age for enlisting was eighteen. And it’s for them to decide if they *want* to.”

“Mere technicality.” Walters waved a hand, the gold badge glinting. “Exceptions can be made in extenuating circumstances such as these. After all…” He tried to catch the boys’ eyes again. “...you *want* to protect the Earth, don’t you?”

Behind their parents’ legs, Sonic gritted his teeth. Tails hugged himself tight.

“And,” he added, watching their reactions carefully, “your… two humans would be compensated *well* . You’d like that, wouldn’t you? If you could help these humans?”

Sonic’s eyes flickered up to his parents, throat bobbing.

Knuckles clenched his fists, and pushed his way forward. “Not like this. Not through coercion. If we choose to fight, it will be on *our* terms.”

Maddie reached for him, but he shook his head and stood his ground.

Walters frowned. “You’re turning down an extraordinary opportunity, young man. With G.U.N.’s resources you could-”

“Your time for talking is over,” the echidna said firmly. “Go now. Before you dishonor yourself further.”

The white-haired human squared his shoulders, huffing, “Well. You can forget about the gift card I’d brought.”

Poking his head out from behind Tom’s legs, Sonic said, “Yeah, we’re all real heartbroken about that.”

“Perhaps in the future you’ll come to your senses.” He stepped towards the parents. “And let me make something clear, Wachowskis. The papers in those folders make them yours legally. It doesn’t stop us from getting them to choose where they go. We’ll find an offer they’ll take. Superweapons are born to fight and kill. You can’t stop them from following their nature. If you’re smart, you’ll put them somewhere where they can be useful. Before you end up in their line of fire.”

“We would *never*-” Sonic began, holding tighter to Tom’s leg, but a look from the Commander had him quiet again.

“Our purpose is to be a family,” Knuckles said. He didn’t shrink under the Commander’s gaze. “We honor ourselves by being theirs. Just as you dishonor yourself by trying to take us away.”

The Commander's chin tilted upward, looking at Knuckles from down the bridge of his nose. "Just wait until you snap, and your *family* ends up burnt under your boot. It'll happen. And when it does, we won't be standing around to offer you training. A weapon is a weapon. My offer now is a kind one. The next one won't be."

Knuckles' eyes slotted. "A Warrior is not a weapon," he snapped back. "And next time *you* come near us, I will not be so kind either." He held out a hand. "Goodbye, Commander."

The general stared at his hand with a wrinkled nose. He rolled his eyes. "Fine. Gentleman, let's go! We've got a gift card to use." The officers stationed behind him began to stand and stretch.

"Commander!"

He stopped at the edge of the sidewalk, turning back to see Maddie walking towards him, past her son, his hand still outstretched. She put her own out.

With another dramatic roll of his eyes, he reached out to take her hand.

There was a sound, like popcorn left too long in the microwave, and Walters' knees were buckling. "Ah-!" He tried to pull his hand back, but she held tighter.

"It's really been a pleasure," she said, smile venomous. "I've really loved every second of this *game* . You, calling my son's therapists and the judge, trying to skew our adoption. Really. It's been a ball." She clutched tighter at his hand and he let out a squeak. "Still, let's not make this a regular thing," she said, sweetly. She let go, and he stumbled back, clutching his hand to his chest. There were red lines across his knuckles, and one of his fingers was bent at a strange angle. She reached down to his uninjured hand, plucking the gift card out. "Tell G.U.N thank you for the offer, but we're going to pass. And make sure to tell them that Madeline Wachowski says 'stay the hell away from my kids.'"

She pocketed the gift card just as the other agents popped their heads out of the car to see what had happened. He very quickly got into the passenger seat, glaring out the window.

"You alright, sir?" The driver looked through the opposite window towards the family on the sidewalk.

Maddie grinned. "Firm handshake," she said, shrugging. "It runs in the family."

Knuckles' smile was restrained, but his tail betrayed him, wagging furiously. "Superior to *all*," he murmured.

"She broke the dude's hand??"

"It was merely one-" Knuckles tried to say, but his middle brother pushed his way into view of the laptop's camera.

"Heck yeah she did!"

They were sitting in their favorite booth at Artie's diner. Around them, the adults were bustling about, putting the finishing touches on decorations, setting long foil trays on stands along the bar top, filling buckets with ice. At the far end of the space, Wade wobbled on a chair with balloons in his fist, Rachel hovering nearby.

On the laptop screen, Kayla dipped out of frame, doubled over with laughter. Beside her, Dylan's eyes were wide. "Dang, your mom is *tough*!"

Grinning wide, Sonic brushed at his nose with a forefinger. "Yeah, she gets that from me."

"Mother has existed longer than either of us," Knuckles said seriously. "Besides, if she gets it from *anyone*, she gets it from *me*."

“Doesn’t matter who it was,” Tom called from farther away. “Mom broke a hand and your Aunt threatened to sue the government.”

Knuckles nodded. “Our family is made of warriors,” he intoned. “And Father.”

“Hey!”

“I am doing *the joke*, Father!”

Tom rolled his eyes and went back to talking to the waitress about how many chili dogs they’d need.

From Knuckles' other side, Tails squeezed into frame. "So how many more days of summer vacation do you guys have?"

"Uh, I think 10?" Dylan said, looking at his sister.

"We go back before Labor Day," Kaylee confirmed.

"Bummer," Sonic said.

"Our first day is the Tuesday after," Tails said.

"Lucky. They always make us go early because they figure we'll have snow days." Dylan scratched at his undercut.

"As if the school buses don't have snow chains." Kayla rolled her eyes. "You guys look good, by the way. Dapper AF."

Sonic tugged at his tie. Tails' left ear flicked. Knuckles' muzzle flushed. "What is ay eff?"

“That’s easy,” said Sonic. “It means-”

On the laptop screen, Kayla’s eyes popped. "A lot! It just means, like, 'a lot'! Absolutely, uh… fantastically. Yeah! Absolutely fantastically!”

"Ah. Excellent,” Knuckles nodded, satisfied.

They talked for a few more minutes about school and vacations and about how Dylan and Kayla wanted to visit Green Hills one day, asking if the hole from the giant robot was still there, until Maddie clapped her hands and told them that guests were coming soon.

“We gotta go!” Sonic waved.

Knuckles pushed him to the side. “We will talk soon, Kayla!”

“You *know* it, Knux.”

“Bye Dylan!”

“Bye Tails! Text me pictures of those cards you got!”

The booths were quickly covered in paper tablecloths, Wade dropping off the *Evolved Into a Family* Pokemon cake that the kids had all begged for. They put up balloons and streamers and a huge sign that Knuckles had helped paint with the words WE DEFEATED THE ADOPTION that no one had the heart to tell him made so little sense in the context, but he insisted was exactly what had happened.

Jojo and Sonic snuck into the back just as the guests were beginning to arrive, and before Maddie could stop it from happening, Sonic had stripped out of his suit jacket and shirt, tie landing somewhere in the storage room, and Jojo had tossed her pinchy shoes into her mother’s purse, fishing out flip flops she’d snuck in.

Tails’ tie somehow ended up on a ceiling fan.

Knuckles’ tie was neatly folded and handed over to Maddie, along with his jacket, but he enjoyed the button up shirt enough to keep it on, unbuttoning the first few buttons until he looked like a politician overseeing his constituents, telling them that he was worth their votes because he, and he alone, had *Conquered Adoption and Would Allow All Mother’s to Break the Governments’ Fingers if They Wanted to.*

Maddie could overhear him talking to Artie while people began to sit down.

“She really did that?”

“Oh yes!” Knuckles nodded.

“No kiddin’.”

“She is *powerful*. That is why my middle name will be *her* name.”

“Pretty neat family you’ve got there.”

“That is patently untrue. Sonic is incredibly disorganized and Father always misses spots when he vacuums.”

“That’s not- nevermind.”

The diner filled up fast. Friends and family filtering in, sitting for chili dogs and hamburgers and whatever else the diner could supply as quickly as possible.

“My babies!” Rosie swept them all up when she and Big T filtered in.

“Traffic was a beast,” Big T said, shaking Tom’s hand. “Your Ma floored it. Was worried you’d’ve been called to book us in before we could get here.”

“Jeez, Mom!”

“Oh don’t you start!” Rosie gave him a look before giving each of her grandchildren a heap of kisses, their faces absolutely lighting up. “Can’t believe I’ve got two new *official* grandbabies!”

“We were that before, Gramma!” Tails exclaimed, tail flickering.

“Course you were, baby! Now I’m just legally allowed to let you help me bake.”

“That’s not true. Mom! Is that true!?”

Sonic butted in, eager for the attention. “I’m getting a middle name, too!”

“Oh are you!”

“Mmmhm.” He gestured grandly to himself. “You’re looking at the new and improved *Sonic Thomas Wachowski*.”

Big T’s mustache twitched.

“And,” Sonic added, “Knuckles is taking *Mom’s* name. I told him it was a *girl* name, but-”

“Nonsense!” Rosie tapped his nose. “There ain’t no such thing. Half the drag queens I worked with have names like Dan and Ike, but on stage they’re Wanda and Ella Gance!”

“Really?”

“Mmmhm.”

“Cool!” He spun around. “Knuckles! I think you’re a drag queen now!”

Knuckles turned. “Is that someone who drags down their enemies?”

“I think so!” Sonic shouted back. “Gramma says they’re on a stage! So like wrestling, maybe!”

Knuckles raised his fists. “I will be the *best* drag queen! Right Mother?”

Maddie turned around to hide her laughter.

At the counter, Wade leaned towards Rachel. “My middle name is Francis.”

“I won’t hold it against you,” she whispered back.

The diner was filled with familiar faces, schoolmates and neighbors, teachers and shopkeepers. Plates were piled high with food - all the boys’ favorites - and a bluetooth speaker on the counter blared Sonic’s custom-made adoption playlist.

Among the chaos, Sonic found Knuckles and Tails back in their booth. “So how long you think we can convince Mom and Dad to keep this party going?”

“Past dinner?” Tail guessed.

“At *least* ,” Sonic said.

“But they arranged for occupancy only until two,” Knuckles said, glancing at the clock, which already read 1:30. “It was stated on the invitational stationary.”

“Yeah, but Artie loves us!” Sonic said, leaning back against the vinyl cushion. “And besides, if we really do hafta clear out, we can just move everybody to our house!”

“Our house isn’t big enough for all these people,” Tails got up on his knees to peer over the booth.

“Our yard is.”

“Yeah, I guess it is,” Tails conceded.

“That’s the spirit!” Sonic slung one arm over each of his brother’s shoulders. “I’m tellin’ ya, we’re gonna make this an *epic* rager!”

“But I feel no rage,” Knuckles said.

“Nevermind.” Sonic rolled his eyes, dropping his arms just as Carl approached their table.

“Well, it’s quite a day for you boys, ain’t it?” the old man said genially, thumbs hooks in the straps of his finest pair of overalls.

“I’ll say!” Tails chirped.

“It is the grandest of *all* days,” Knuckles said.

“Seems to me,” Carl said, stroking his beard, “that a day such as this requires a speech.”

“How’zat?” Sonic asked.

“A speech!” Carl said, reaching down to touch the boy’s skinny shoulder. “To commemorate a momentous occasion! So which one of you boys wants to do it?”

Tails’ ears drooped slightly. “Y’mean like… public speaking?”

“I really feel like somebody *besides* the guests of honor should be doing that, Carl,” Sonic said, putting a hand on Tails’ head and ruffling the tuft of fur on top.

Knuckles slapped a hand on the table. “Don’t be silly, brothers! The day is *ours* . *We* should be the ones to mark it.” And then, before Sonic could stop him, he climbed up on top of the formica, tapping his spoon against the side of his milkshake glass. “May I interrupt your revelry for a brief moment, please!”

The diner quieted. Wade hurriedly turned the volume down on the bluetooth speaker. Everyone turned in their direction.

Tails looked mortified.

Sonic looked bemused.

Knuckles looked exactly in his element.

He surveyed the scene proudly, then stuck his spoon into his milkshake so he could gesture out at the group with an open hand. “Nearly a year ago I arrived on this planet. I was angry, misguided, and alone. I came for what I thought was my destiny. What I found was so much greater than I ever could have imagined.” He pointed behind him to Sonic and Tails. “Brothers.” He held an open palm out in Tom and Maddie’s direction. “Parents.” He gestured to the room at large. “Community. Things that I always assumed were beyond my reach. Things for which I am eternally grateful to now have. Now, my brothers expect our celebration will carry on long into the night, but before that, I just want to say one last thing.” Knuckles pounded his chest and held his milkshake aloft before declaring in a booming voice; “I am honored AF to be a part of this family!”

The slap of Tom’s hand against his forehead could be heard throughout the diner, only to be drowned out by Sonic choking on his milkshake.

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